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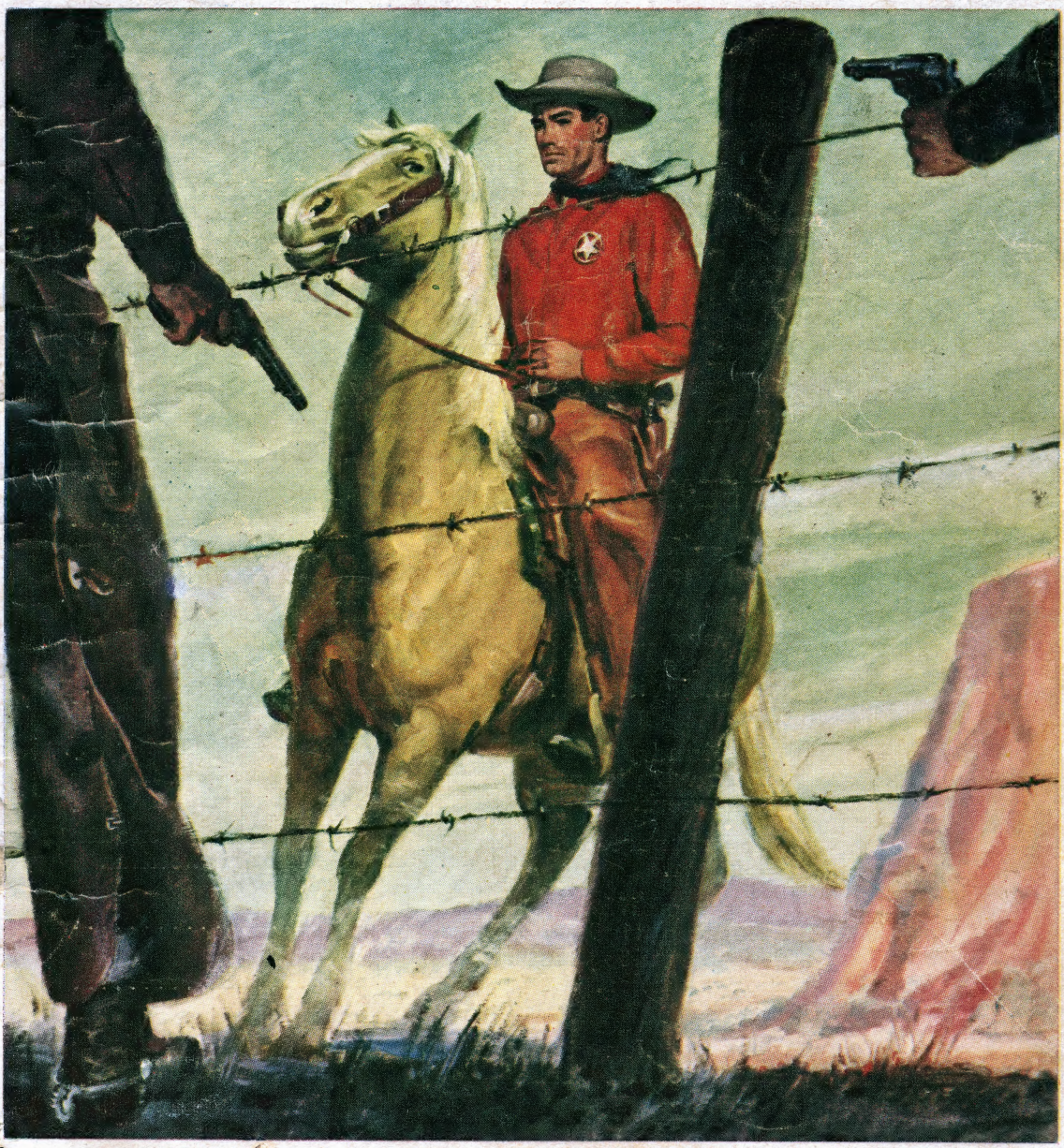

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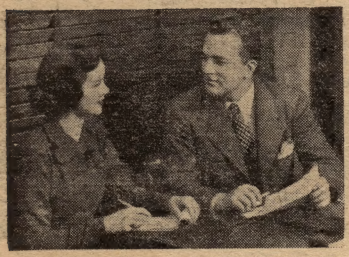

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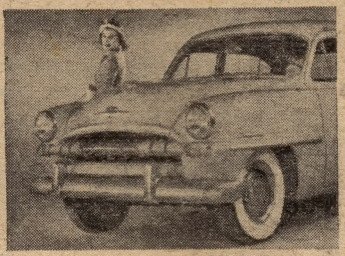

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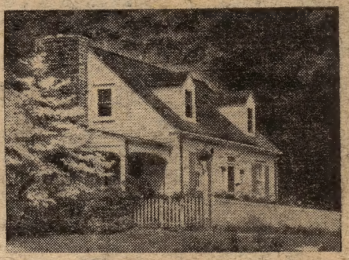

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 51, No. 2 JULY, 1953

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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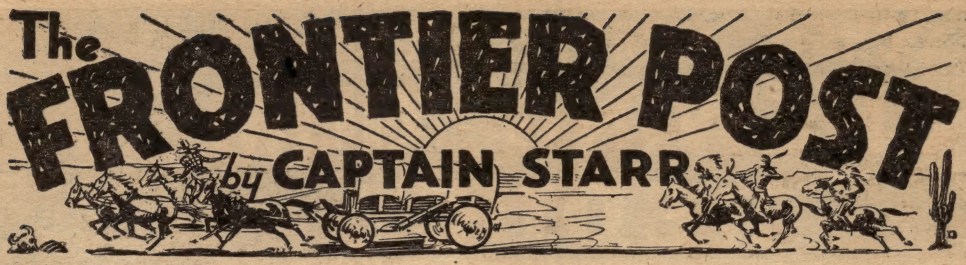

The Baron of Arizona

THE sensational exposé of a half century ago erased all but the memory of James Addison Reavis, the "Baron of Arizona." When a title searcher held Reavis's "old Spanish land grant" up to a strong light and saw the watermark of a Wisconsin paper mill on one of the "parchment" pages, that crushed forever the Reavis claim to a hundred-million dollar hunk of the rich heart of Arizona.

It is easy to write off the Reavis claim as a gigantic hoax. In fact, many powerful Arizona interests who were paying heavy tribute to the Baron were delighted to do so, and to hurry him on his way into prison as a convicted swindler. The Southern Pacific railroad alone paid Reavis a reported $50,000 because S.P. tracks crossed his vast domain. Big mining companies paid untold ransom. From these and others Reavis collected enough to make him suddenly and immensely rich.

Was Reavis nothing more than a brazen swindler? Or was he, instead, the tragic victim of an underhanded conspiracy? Was he capable of such rank stupidity as to fake old parchment with modern writing bond? Such paper bears telltale watermarks, as any school child knows.

Experts Fooled

The actual existence of the Peralta land grant had been recognized for nearly a century and a half. It had been examined by numerous experts, never a one of whom cast any doubt on its validity. The nationally celebrated lawyer, Robert G. Ingersoll, called it "flawless and genuine."

In 1748 King Ferdinand VI of Spain granted to one Don Miguel Peralta 300 square leagues in New Spain, and bestowed on him the title, "Baron of the Colorados."

The land and title passed through a succession of surviving heirs until in 1864 they passed into the hands of an American kinsman named Willing. In 1867, Willing conveyed his heritage to Reavis. Reavis was a nobody then, a horsecar conductor of St. Joseph, Missouri, who had come west and married a half-breed Indian girl living on a northern California reservation.

This girl, according to documents in Reavis's hands, was the last of the Peraltas!

Reavis spent a lot of money and time substantiating his claim. He visited Mexico, Spain, Washington and New York. In 1880 he showed up in Arizona, making himself known as the "Baron of Arizona," a slightly more modest version of the original Peralta title, and established the boundaries of his enormous barony.

High and Mighty

The 300 Spanish leagues consisted of 3750 square miles along Gila River and included most of Salt River Valley, adjacent to the territorial capital of Phoenix.

The Peralta grant was a rectangle 236 miles long and 78 miles wide, roughly the size of the state of Connecticut. Within the boundaries were thriving towns and valuable resources and developments. All now belonged to Jim Reavis, ex-horsecar conductor!

The people who had laughed off the old Peralta land claim as too fantastic to take seriously were jolted when Reavis's agents came to collect rents, dues and royalties from them.

For 20 years Reavis had worked and planned for this triumph. Now followed his six golden years, from 1887 to 1893, in which he tightened his hold as Baron of Arizona.

He took that self-chosen title very serious-

ly. Besides his business headquarters at a small place called Arizola, he maintained elegant homes in Mexico, in New York and Washington—and even a castle in Spain with a great retinue of servants.

The half-breed Indian girl bore him two children, whom they dressed and raised like royalty. The rich Reavises lived in arrogant splendor, treating other people like subjects.

This absurd aristocratic pretense rankled proud and independent Arizonans more than Reavis's economic grip on them. Had the "Baron" but known, this was the start of his downfall. Free Americans would not for long endure being lorded over by a one-time horsecar conductor parading around in royal purple, like a Roman Caesar.

In one way or another, Arizona was going to shuck off the "Baron." Even though Mexico recognized his claim, and the United States had given tacit recognition to the Peralta grant in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, his days were numbered.

The Bubble Bursts

The crash came with the belated discovery that at least a part of the age-yellowed Peralta deed was as phony as a three-dollar bill. On the basis of that, the court threw out the entire document.

Reavis's toadying followers and fair-weather friends deserted him in droves. He was charged with fraud and in 1895 was sentenced to six years in prison. Even his big-shot lawyer, Robert G. Ingersoll, gave him the brushoff.

Reavis served only about two years of his sentence. Broke and in shattered health he was seen for a while in and about Phoenix. He died soon afterwards in obscurity.

His half-breed wife and the two royal heirs moved into Mexico and were not heard from again.

That was the end of one of the most grandiose dreams of all time, and it is amazing that it became a solid reality if only for a while.

Nobody knows how much Reavis cleaned up before the bubble of fortune burst. And nobody in Arizona today seems to know what became of the portions of the Peralta land grant known to be genuine and valid. All that remains is the memory. And that is fading so fast that hardly one out of ten present-day Arizonans ever heard of the "Baron of Arizona!"

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range

News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

●

The glass industry in this country was started so that beads and other glass trinkets could be made for the express purpose of trading with the Indians. For what and for whom, we wonder, was the wooden nickel industry expressly started? Manhattan Mohicans perchance?

The U. S. Marines, always a picturesque outfit, are becoming even more so via a new batch of recruits from the South Dakota Indian reservations. Recent Leatherneck rookies are: Patrick Aloysius Red Elk, Maynard Gerald Top Bear, Woodrow George Respects Nothing, Percival E. Left Hand, and Leroy M. Kills Enemy.

There are many live, growing fences in Arizona. The ocotillō cactus, firm and tall and prickly, is frequently used on ranches there to take the place of barbed wire fencing.

Idaho and Nevada claim that Lake Mead is the largest artificial lake in the world, whereas Kentucky makes the same claim for its big dam-lake which they've named Kentucky Lake. The deep silence from Texas and California is almost spectacular. Here is one "biggest" battle in which neither of the prize "biggest" claimants wants to get its feet wet, it seems. Could it be they're afeared of being known henceforth as "a long drink of water?"

The what's-in-a-name department: Dr. I. Cutter is a San Antonio surgeon. In Texas, that is . . . Oklahoma has a town named Bowlegs . . . During the gold-rush days in California, Shasta County had a mining community that actually went by the name of One Horse Town.

Of the 200 North American Indian tribes, only three—the Cherokees, Aztecs and Mayas—had a system of writing. And no television, either. Some people had all the luck.

Accidents that could happen only in Texas: A man in the town of Mesquite was skinning a dead horse, hit a nerve and got a kick in the face . . . Near Del Rio a character practicing his imitation of squirrel chatter was shot and wounded by a squirrel hunter . . . An actor in Houston, making like a rooster in a performance, dislocated his jaw . . . Near Harlingen a bull gored the car of the county's artificial inseminator . . . Tsk, tsk.

Along the Rushow River in northwest Canada horses eat practically nothing but frozen fish. Grass pike, no doubt.

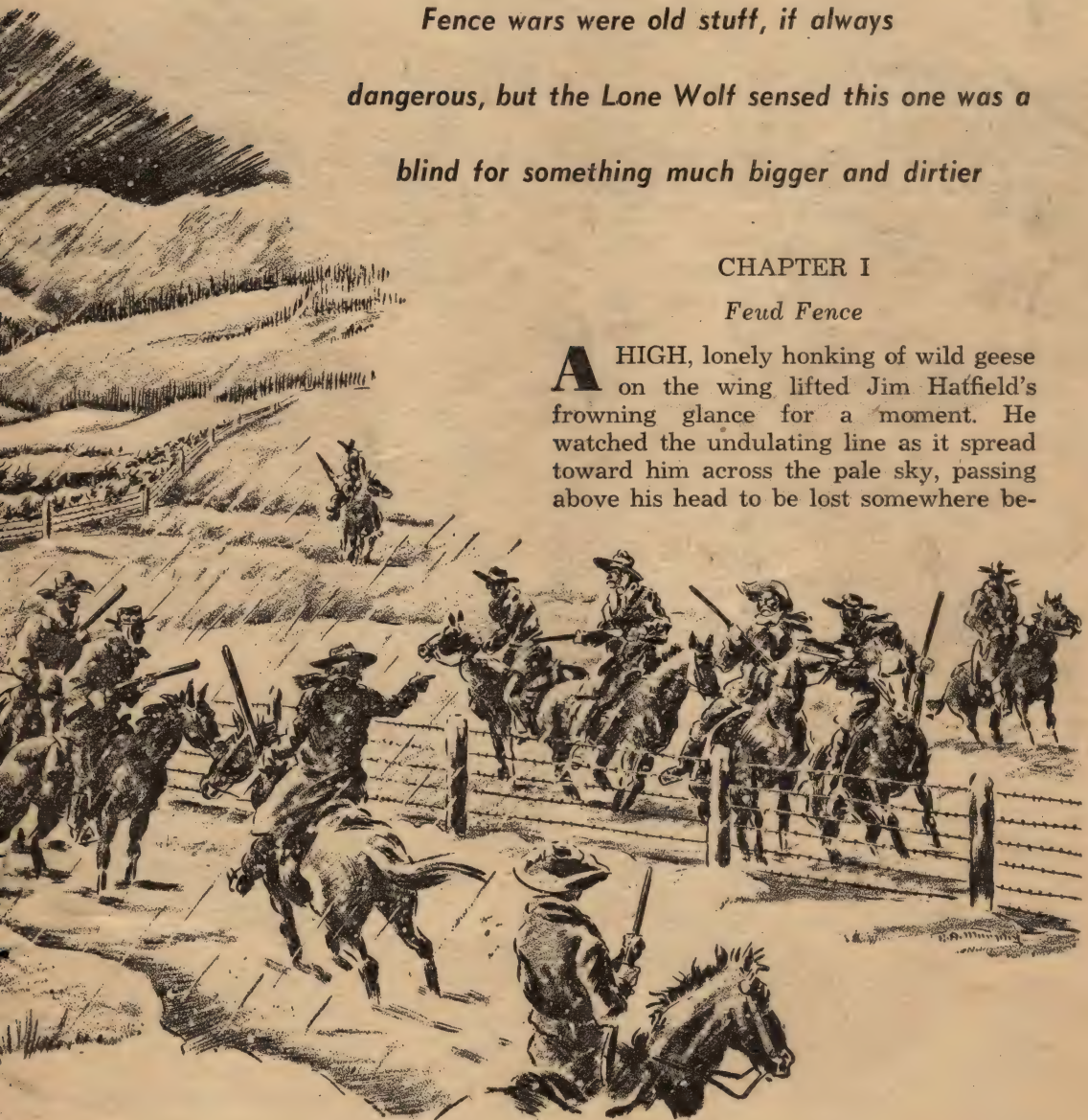
The Barbed

Plain above the howl of the wind came the eerie low of cattle

Barrier

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

Fence wars were old stuff, if always dangerous, but the Lone Wolf sensed this one was a blind for something much bigger and dirtier



CHAPTER I

Feud Fence

A HIGH, lonely honking of wild geese on the wing lifted Jim Hatfield's frowning glance for a moment. He watched the undulating line as it spread toward him across the pale sky, passing above his head to be lost somewhere be-

yond the flat southern horizon. Despite the sun's deceptive heat, those migrating birds were a warning that summer was actually long past, that this stretch of Panhandle range, with its sleek herds of Horseshoe-branded cattle, waited on a long-delayed winter.

Hatfield's thoughts were not concerned with weather just then, however, but with the unexpected barrier he had found blocking his way. He had been following a wavering wagon track north, hoping it would take him to a town called Arbuckle that lay somewhere this side of the Canadian River brakes.

He had business in that town—Texas Ranger business. But now topping a slight crest in the nearly level stretch of mesquite flats, he could see that he appeared to be stopped.

Sunlight made a smeared reflection on tight-stretched wire—three strands of it, running straight as a ruled line east to west across the grass. Hatfield pushed the stetson back from his forehead as he considered the work and expense to someone, putting this much fence across open range. That was peculiar in itself, since barbed wire hadn't so far invaded this part of Texas to any noticeable extent. It was a big, lonely country, with free land and plenty of it, with no nesters yet to crowd in and make trouble.

"Spite fence!" Hatfield muttered. "Couple of neighbors must hate each other pretty bad, to go to all this trouble."

There was no gate within his range of vision. The wagon track he had been following had been sliced straight across by the fanged wire, and a cedar panel post stood squarely between its ruts.

Laws on the statute books regulated the construction of barbed wire fences, but whoever had put this up either had never heard of the laws, or didn't give a damn.

Eyes narrowing, Hatfield spoke to Goldy, his big sorrel, and the golden mount moved forward until the three strands forced him to a halt. The Ranger laid a hand on the topmost strand, gauging its tension.

Evidently the fence was kept in constant repair, for the posts were firm-set, the panels tight and double-stapled.

IT SEEMED almost too bad to have to cut it, but he had no choice. Lacking pliers, he was looking for a flat rock he could use when an angry shout brought his glance up quickly.

Two riders who had topped the rise over which he had just ridden, were spurring straight down to him. Hatfield saw the Horseshoe brands on their mounts, caught a glint of gunmetal when one of the men slid a Colt six-shooter from leather.

The Ranger's gray eyes narrowed dangerously, but he did not reach for his matched revolvers in their hand-made holsters. Instead, he waited calmly, and let the riders bear in.

They had the marks of being cowmen. The man with the gun was perhaps in his early fifties, though years of sun and wind had cured and darkened his skin to a texture and color that made his age guesswork. His roan mustache was full and down-drooping. A flat-crowned sodbuster hat shoved to the back of his head and held by a whangleather throat-latch, showed him to be nearly bald. He began to yell angrily, "Get away from there, damn you, or—" and stopped short.

For as Hatfield turned the sun picked a reflection from the polished badge pinned to his shirt. Both horsemen pulled to a stop, their broncs' forehooves gouting sod.

The other rider was a younger man, heavy-shouldered, dark-haired, perhaps thirty, and marked by a scowling sullenness. Hatfield pegged him as a man of few words, one who most likely did his arguing with the craggy fists that were now dragging on the reins. He looked at Jim Hatfield's badge and his eyes darkened.

"A Ranger, Boss!"

"Yeah," the other rider grunted. "Yeah, I see! I never credited that crook Allenbow with so much nerve!" And the gun he held tipped up suddenly, its black muzzle trained on the Ranger's chest. "You heard me! Move away from that fence!"

Hatfield looked at the gun, and at the man's clouded, dangerous stare. There was no fear in the Ranger's gray-eyed gaze. He said, "Are you sure you mean this?"

The cowman's mouth twisted sourly beneath his brush of mustache. "Tin badge or not, makes no difference to me! I told Nels Allenbow I'd gutshoot any man he

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

sent to try and cut this wire. Maybe he thinks I was just talking!"

"And what makes you so sure I've got anything to do with this man, Nels Allenbow?"

The younger rider broke in uneasily, "Better go slow, Boss. Ain't smart to get tough with no Ranger!"

"You make sense," Hatfield told him, nodding. He turned back to the man with the gun. Some of the sand appeared to be leaking out of the fellow. "You own the fence, and the Horseshoe brand, I take it? Jim Hatfield's my name."

"Hatfield!" The man's eyes widened. Plainly both riders were familiar with the name, and naturally the reputation that went with it. The bald-headed man swallowed. He looked at the gun in his hand, then suddenly was shoving it into holster as though it were too hot for him to hold.

He said gruffly, "Yeah, it's my range you're on. I'm Oral Gant, and this here is Mike Maugher, my foreman." He added, with poor grace, "If I made a mistake, then what *do* you want?"

"Only to go where I was headed when this fence of yours stopped me. Does this road lead to Arbuckle?"

"It used to."

"You know, I suppose, that you're breaking the law by closing off a public thoroughfare. And that the statute requires a gate at each three-mile interval of wire?"

Gant's face darkened. "I built this thing to keep Allenbow's Broad A cowstealers from getting at my herds. I'm supposed to put in gates for them?"

"It's a matter of law, Gant. I'm only telling you." The Ranger added, "And keep your hand away from that gun!"

THE rancher's freckled hand had again started inching nearer the butt of the holstered weapon. At the crisp warning his arm jerked and he brought the hand quickly back and piled it on his saddlehorn. But a pulse was throbbing in his throat and his eyes blazed with fury.

"I'll run my own affairs, damn it! There ain't any law to prevent a man protecting his property—and the whole Ranger constabulary can't stop me from doing that, any way I see fit!"

Once more the foreman, Mike Maugher, stopped the altercation before his boss's quick temper could lead to real trouble.

He kneed his horse forward and told Hatfield, "This here wagon track never has been much used since the trouble broke out between us and Allenbow. Main road to Arbuckle bypasses the Broad A. You'll find it over east about four miles. There's a gate, too—with a lock. Come along and I'll open it for you."

The Ranger nodded. "That's better.

But still not good enough. Gant, just remember what I told you about the law."

"Come back and talk about the law," Oral Gant retorted harshly, "when you've got the rustlers cleaned off the Broad A!" He shrugged, and gathered the reins. Pulling his horse about, he said sourly, "Go on, Mike. Let him through the gate!"

He spurred away across the sear prairie, his ugly mood shown by the very set of him in saddle. Mike Maugher threw a questioning glance at the Ranger and got Hatfield's nod. The Horseshoe foreman gigged his raw-boned gelding and sent it off along the fence at a sharp canter. Hatfield put Goldy at his heels, thinking drily, an ill-natured pair, this silent foreman and his pugnacious boss.

They kept a pace that made talk impossible, as the shining fence streaked along beside them and the westering sun warmed their backs. Presently the brown ribbon of the main road to Arbuckle came in sight and when they reached it Hatfield saw that there was indeed a gate, with a big rusted padlock on the hasp.

Still without speaking, Maugher fished out a key and, leaning from saddle, snapped the lock open and shoved the gate wide. Hatfield nodded curt thanks and rode through, then turned back to watch the foreman drag the gate shut again, and hook the lock in place.

For all his size, big Mike's hands moved with a swift sureness. There was nothing clumsy about him—probably wasn't when he worked with animals either. A born stockman, but a sullen and suspicious human being which showed in his brooding eyes. He shot the Ranger a surly glance now as Hatfield asked suddenly:

"How long have your boss and this Nels Allenbow been having trouble? The fence looks new."

He thought for a moment the black-haired ramrod would not bother to answer. When he did it was in the sparest number of words.

"Put it up last spring."

"Must have been pretty expensive."

"Figure it yourself," Maugher grunted. "Wire costs fifteen per hundred, in Dodge City. Fence posts are a dime apiece, gate posts seven-fifty. Add the freight onto that."

"And you mean to tell me Gant went to all that expense and trouble just to keep Broad A men off his land? Seems to me, if Allenbow is that dangerous a cowthief, it would have been better to pin the proof on him and let the law handle it!"

The foreman turned on him, facing him squarely across the barrier of barbed steel. "This section settles its own problems, Hatfield. Might be a good thing if you learned that right now!"

The Ranger let it go. But something about the big fellow's manner prompted him to ask quietly, "What's graveling you, anyway, Maugher? What you got under your tail that makes you this uncivil?"

The dark eyes flashed with quick, stung anger. But Mike Maugher merely clamped his jaw and with a wrench of his big shoulders pulled his gelding around. At a kick of a spurred heel the horse sprang away into that hard-pressed gait which seemed habitual with the Horseshoe foreman.

Hatfield watched him through narrowed, thoughtful eyes. He judged, sore at the world about something. Or is there more to it than that?

HE WAS reining away from the gate, wanting to put this tough pair from his mind, when he caught a glimpse of another rider at the fringe of some willows a hundred yards away.

An Allenbow hand, he supposed, patrolling the Broad A side of the fence. He must have seen Maugher and Gant talking to the stranger with the star. Now, knowing he had been detected, he melted quickly into the trees and Hatfield watched him thoughtfully.

This fence, and the bad feelings it had engendered, had enough dynamite in it to bring open range warfare at any moment, Hatfield decided, and if it did, he would find it his business, as an officer of the law. But another matter entirely, the one that had brought him to the Panhandle,

demanded his first official attention.

He still carried in his pocket the letter his superior, Captain Bill McDowell, had handed him—an anonymous letter written in careful copperplate script which had shown up at Ranger Headquarters in Austin last week. It might be no more than another crank note. But both Hatfield and his chief believed it deserved to be investigated. It read:

> Send a man here to Arbuckle in case you would like some information about one Duff Prager, wanted for the Coleman County Stockmen's Association swindle seven years ago. He's in this part of the country.

The brief letter had stirred grim interest at Headquarters. For Bert McKibben, as good a man as had ever worn the star-and-circle shield of the Rangers, lay in a shallow grave because he had got too close on the trail of the elusive swindler, Duff Prager. More for this reason than because of Prager's particularly cold-blooded Coleman County steal, the man had been high on the Rangers' wanted list. But in seven years this had been the first break since he had disappeared without a trace, and a curtain of silence had dropped behind him.

The letter might mean nothing. Still, it had an authentic ring.

So here was Jim Hatfield, known far and wide as the Lone Wolf Ranger, out to find the man, with no adequate description of the criminal, and not even any way of identifying the sender of the note until the writer chose to get in touch with him—which was the reason he wore the circled star in plain sight of all.

It was as dangerous an assignment as Jim Hatfield had ever tackled. For his badge made him the target for an unknown killer who already had disposed of one Texas Ranger. He was riding blind, and knew it. He didn't need a fence war breaking out at this time to complicate his chore.

"Let's trail, Goldy!" he muttered. "Or it'll be dark before we hit town. And here sure is one time I want a good look at what I'm riding into!"

CHAPTER II

Unfriendly Town

THE long light of a blood-red sunset, spreading across the raw wooden buildings and the rutted streets of Arbuckle, gave them an altogether deceptive patina. This town was a meager enough place—a few blocks of business houses that played out in scattered shacks, flung haphazardly across the mesquite flats bordering a stream bed hung with dusty willows.

A man who stood at a second-story window of an office in the biggest building in town—a combination hotel and gaming house—was not admiring the sunset colors, nor watching the normal pulse of life through the drowsy cowtown. His glance was following a stranger riding along the street below, a tall figure on a golden sorrel horse, big-hatted and armed with a brace of Frontier model Colts in matched holsters. The man at the window saw a sheen of metal pinned to the shirt of the stranger, and his agate-hard eyes glinted.

The door behind him swung open. Without knocking a man burst in, closed the door and placed his shoulders against it.

"Gent wearing a Ranger's badge just rode into town, Boss. He—"

"I see him, you fool!" snapped the man at the window, throwing him an acid glance. "What did you think I was looking at?"

"It don't sound good, Boss!" The speaker was a bony, nervous individual. He passed the knuckles of a bony hand across his sallow face. "Never been one of that breed show up in all the years we been in business here."

"You get panicky, Harry, over nothing. Might be any number of reasons for him coming. Don't lose your head."

The bony man called Harry nodded, appearing unconvinced. "Could be riding up to Tascosa, maybe."

"Exactly. If he stays, then will be time enough to start worrying."

"Does he seem to be riding on through?"

The man at the window turned for another downward look. He was stocky, hatchet-faced, with a cold surface that it would have been hard to dent. But his cruel mouth took a hard twist now, at what he saw.

"He's tying, down front. I think he's coming into the bar."

He cursed softly, then swung away from the window and crossed the ornately furnished office to the door.

Harry, whose other name was Dodge, ventured as he opened the door for him, "Would you like me to talk to him? Sort of feel him out?"

"You?" The other man gave him a look of withering contempt. "Stupid bungler! I'll do it myself."

Harry cringed, lifted his shoulder in a shrug. "All right—all right. I was only thinking—"

Without pausing, the other man lifted an arm and carelessly dealt Harry a backhanded blow across the face that sent him stumbling back against the open door.

"Don't try to think!" the stocky man snapped. "Just do the job you're paid to do."

Harry Dodge tremblingly fingered a bloody lip, and naked hatred was in the glance that followed the man responsible for it from the room.

The stocky, hawk-faced man strode out of the office and along a short hallway that opened onto a gallery running across the rear of the huge barroom that was the heart of this establishment. Reflectored oil lamps, on the big wagon-wheel ceiling fixtures, had already been lighted and hoisted into place.

Light gleamed on the Wheel of Fortune, on the faro and roulette layouts and on the ranks of gaming tables.

Behind the ornate bar, jeweled bottles were doubled in the long mirror. Halfway down the bannistered staircase the man saw the batwings at the street end of the long room thrust open, and the stranger wearing a Ranger star entered and stood a moment looking around before moving over to the bar.

JIM HATFIELD placed an elbow against the edge of the wood and, taking off his stetson, ran a forefinger around the inside of the sweatband while he gave the room an astonished appraisal. Short of Dodge City, he had never seen anything more elaborate. Hardly any kind of gambling facility that the place didn't supply, and in a cowtown the size of Arbuckle, this wasn't to be expected.

A bartender approached, but before Hatfield could give his order the man he had noticed coming down the stairway was suddenly at his side, nodding and speaking, with the frostiest of smiles breaking the hard lines of his face. The bartender quickly faded back to wait respectfully.

"Evening, Officer. I saw you ride in just now. In town on business, maybe?"

Hatfield flicked the greeter with a glance. The man was too expensively dressed, and despite his smile his eyes, deep-set above a hatchetlike nose and chin, were cold as chips of agate. "Maybe," the Ranger drawled, noncommittally.

The man who had accosted him was not one to notice a rebuff if it didn't suit his purpose. He went on as though Hatfield had not spoken:

"Didn't know anyone hereabouts had sent for the Rangers. No trouble to warrant it that I've heard tell of. We had an argument between a couple of the ranches awhile back over stolen cattle, but that's more or less quieted down." He lifted a stubby hand, indicating the big room and its furnishings. "Naturally, running a place like this I keep pretty close tab on most that goes on." He added quickly, as though reading the question in Hatfield's eyes, "But I do plenty of business—the games draw 'em, and I serve good likker. Got a reputation that extends over a good piece of this Panhandle country. So"—the false smile widened and the voice was cordial—"I might possibly be of service. If so, just call on Nick Ide—that's me." He tapped his chest with a thumb.

The Ranger nodded briefly. "Thanks. My name is Hatfield."

He thought he detected a flicker of something—alarm, perhaps?—cross the surface of Ide's eyes. "The Lone Wolf?"

"I been called that."

If Nick Ide was disconcerted to learn the identity of his guest he quickly covered it. "Well, this is a real honor!" he exclaimed heartily. "The whole Southwest knows that name, I guess!"

He jerked a finger imperiously at the bartender, bringing the fellow hurrying with bottle and glasses. Ide poured for both, and Hatfield picked up his drink.

"Thanks," he grunted, and downed it. "Good stock." But he shook his head at the offer of a second shot. "Sign outside indicated that this was a hotel," he commented.

"It's-that, among other things," Nick Ide told him. "Lobby's right through the door yonder. If you were wanting a room, I'll fix you up myself."

Hatfield let himself be escorted across the gambling hall and through a swinging door that gave onto the hotel wing of the building. Furnishings here were less ornate. A few rockers lined the strip of carpeting leading to the street door. A dusty rubber plant in a tub occupied one corner.

A clerk was behind the desk—a pasty-skinned, bony man with what struck Jim Hatfield as a strangely anxious manner. One cheek looked freshly bruised, he noticed, and wondered about it.

"All right, Mr. Dodge," Nick Ide told this man with an airy gesture of dismissal. "I'll take care of Mr. Hatfield."

The man nodded obsequiously, glance shuttling between the two while he touched tongue to a corner of his mouth, that seemed to be bleeding slightly. He disappeared through a door behind the desk.

"Staying overnight?" Nick Ide asked as he opened the register and laid a pen in front of the Ranger. "Or longer?"

"I'll let you know," Hatfield said, not helping his curiosity, and signed.

"There you are." Ide placed a key in his hand. "Room Thirty-five."

"Thanks. Where can I get some food?"

"We don't serve meals here. You might try Mike's place, down the street a block. But stay away from the Clover Leaf—it's no more than a greasy spoon."

HATFIELD nodded and went out, pocketing the key. Standing beside Goldy he pulled on his stetson, looking again at the building he had left, tallying his impression of its owner. He decided, too interested in me to be honest. No telling what irregularities lurked behind the gilded façade of the big hotel and gambling bar. But might there be even more to it?

He mounted and rode Goldy up the street to a livery barn, put the sorrel stallion into a stall, gave him a rubdown and a watering, and a generous bait of grain. Dusk was settling when he walked out into the street again, carrying his blanket roll.

A few more of the buildings were lighted now. Hatfield noticed a sign in a window across the street:

THE CLOVER LEAF CAFÉ

This called to mind Nick Ide's remarks, and on impulse he went across the dusty ruts. A bell above the eat shack door jangled as he entered.

It wasn't the greasy spoon Ide had called it. The place looked clean, and so did the bald-headed cook's white apron. Hatfield took a seat at the counter and ordered. The man serving him gave his badge an interested stare but made no comment as he limped about, setting out a tumbler of water and silverware, preparing to fry the steak and potatoes Hatfield had called for.

"Nice evening," the Ranger commented, and got a short nod in answer. The bald-headed man had a disgruntled air. "Nick Ide, at the hotel, gave your food a nice plug."

The man turned from the stove, long-handled fork upraised.

"Like hell he did! He steers the trade down street to Mike's. That's what Mike pays him for!"

"You trying to tell me that Ide collects for that?"

"The whole town shells out to Nick Ide," growled the cook. "Everybody but me! I won't knuckle under and Ide knows it!" He pushed aside the apron, giving Hatfield a glimpse at the gun and holster strapped to his leg. He gave the holster a slap, and returned to his work.

It looked to Hatfield as though he had come to the right place if he wanted information about the hotel man.

"You been in this country long?" he asked casually.

"Longer'n anybody—before any of the other whites, even. Was raised by the Comanches, if you want to know. Fact!" He spoke with evident pride. "They massacreed a wagon train bound for Californee, when I was a baby, and I was the only one they spared. Lived like an Injun till I was thirteen. I been a lot of man in my time—and now look at me! Stuck with a game leg, running a hash joint nobody will eat at because Nick Ide tells 'em not to!"

"Is he new to the country?"

The man squinted into smoking grease as he computed. "I'd call him that. Didn't hit the Panhandle until—oh, five-six years ago. Don't know where he come from, or for that matter why any feller with his bankroll would want to settle in a place the size of Arbuckle. Reckon he's just one of these gents that like to be a big frog in a little puddle. Sure, that gambling hall he built has paid him plenty cash—maybe a few other things have, too."

"What things?" prompted the Ranger, but the man only shrugged.

"I'm doing too much talking now, so I better shut up. What would I know about the goings-on in that gambling hell of Ide's? Nothing to tell a lawman!"

He ended that speech with a clamped jaw, and a clatter of dishes as he got a plate off a stack. He speared Hatfield's steak and spuds into it, set it in front of his customer, and busily poured coffee from a blackened pot.

Hatfield sensed he would get nothing further out of him, but what he had learned seemed worth remembering.

CHAPTER III

Shadow Shot

EARLY as it was, evening trade seemed already to be booming at Nick Ide's. Horses stood at the hitch-posts, and as Hatfield approached along the sidewalk, with the dry planks rattling underfoot, he saw a fresh group of riders enter town with a whoop and a rush, lifting a saffron cloud of dust into the window-spilled lamplight. They slid their broncs to a halt and leaped down to tie, and tramp inside the bar.

On the deep porch, with twin entrances into gambling hall and hotel lobby, Hatfield paused to spin a cigarette and light it, cupping the match in the palm of a hand to shield it from possible watching eyes in the shadows across the street. He stood a moment looking over this town and listening to the night noises that were dominated by a growing racket within the bar behind him.

He thought of his mission here—of the elusive Duff Prager who might at this moment be somewhere in this squalid scatter of frame buildings called Arbuckle. He thought of the unknown letter writer. By now the presence of a Ranger in town surely would have become common knowledge. Both the fugitive and the informer undoubtedly had him spotted. It was uncomfortable, being so completely in the dark, and with nothing he could do but wait for something to break.

He threw his cigarette into the dirt and, turning, walked inside. His room was on the second floor, at the back—a small, shabby room with a dresser and chair, and a brass bedstead gleaming faintly in the light that seeped through the one window.

After he had closed the hall door Hatfield could still hear plainly, through flimsy walls, the racket in the big gambling room.

A lamp stood on the dresser. Hatfield shook it, heard the slosh of oil inside. He snapped a match on his thumbnail, touched it to the wick. He was replacing the chimney when a gunshot sounded. The window beside him went out with a smash of broken glass!

The slug clapped into plaster somewhere behind him, but Hatfield had already blown out the lamp and dropped to the floor. On one knee he scooped a six-gun from holster and went scooting across to the shattered window.

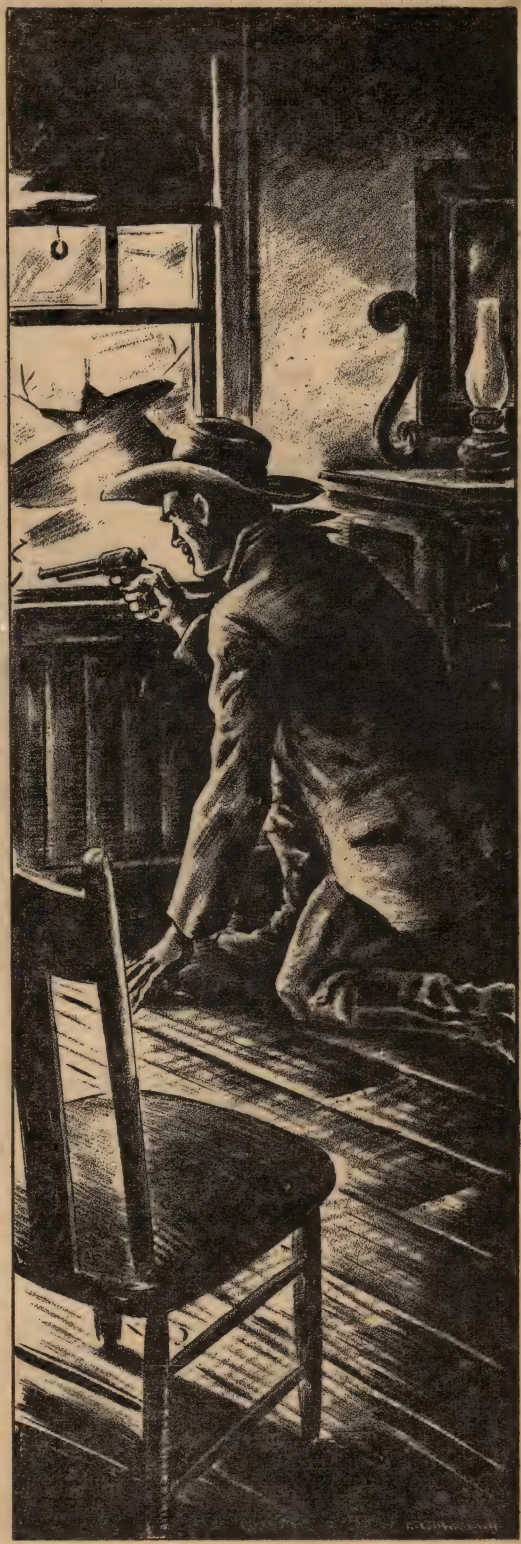
From the angle the shot had taken, he thought it must have come from the roof or window of a neighboring building. Or more likely—as he remembered that the hotel was somewhat apart from its nearest neighbors—from a lean-to projecting from the back of the building. Gun lifted, he raised himself for a look.

Sure enough, below and a little to the side he saw the slanting roof—and saw the man crouched there on the shingles. Light from a window fell across the huddled figure, and Hatfield looked square into the upturned face.

It was not a face to be forgotten easily. It had almost an animal look. The man wore no hat, and his black hair, clipped short, grew low upon his forehead. The features were heavy, and crowded into the narrow space between brow and chin. They tallied to as thoroughly ugly a face as Jim Hatfield had ever come across.

In the same instant the man caught a glimpse of the Ranger. His face twisted into a contorted grimace, then the gun smashed again. Lead thudded into the frame of the window. But Hatfield's six-gun was poked through splintered glass and he triggered back, muzzle flame appearing at the flash of the ambusher's gun.

He missed his shot, but he must have startled the would-be assassin thoroughly. For the next moment the man was



Below him he saw the slanting roof

scrambling out of range of the window and Hatfield heard the thud as he leaped to the ground.

Instantly Hatfield was running the broken window open, jarring loose shards of splintered glass. He threw a leg across the sill, then the other, pushed himself free in a hard, sideward leap that got him onto the lean-to roof with only inches to spare. He landed in a sprawl on rattling shingles, almost lost his gun. But at once he scrambled up and, a hand set against the roof edge, vaulted over to the dark alley below.

Although jarred, he managed to keep his footing—and met the rush of his attacker. A descending gun-barrel whistled past his head as he dodged and threw a fist square into the bushwhacker's dimly visible face. It smashed home. He heard a grunt of pain, felt a tooth score his knuckle. A heavy boot struck his shin but he managed to twist aside from the lifting knee aimed at his groin.

HE JABBED with his gun then, felt its muzzle punch hard against the man's belly.

"You want me to shoot?" he gritted.

But the man seemed possessed by a reckless frenzy. Disregarding the gun rammed into his middle he lunged wildly sideward, jerking loose the hand that Hatfield had clamped upon his shirt front.

As the fabric tore in his fingers Hatfield was pulled violently off-balance. His shoulder struck the wall, and before he could right himself and bring up his gun, his assailant was lost in the black shadows and running hard.

Not knowing the town, or how many more enemies a Ranger might have waiting for a chance to kill him, it would have been foolhardy to go recklessly hunting this one. Jaw hard, Hatfield dropped the smoking gun back into holster and, flexing his hurt knuckle, listened as the retreating steps faded.

Had Duff Prager, true to form, made a try to rid himself of a Ranger who had come too close to his trail? Or was this something else altogether, something perhaps involving Nick Ide? Hatfield wasn't forgetting that Ide, himself, had assigned him that room, setting him up for an ambusher to have a clear shot at him from that handy lean-to roof.

The shooting hadn't gone unnoticed. Voices were shouting, and men had begun milling in the alley. They tried to corner him but he shoved past them and their questions. Entering a door at the rear of the hotel he walked straight through to the lobby.

Harry Dodge, the nervous-looking clerk, was behind the desk. The bruise Hatfield had noticed on his cheek was more livid now and it make an ugly contrast with the pallor of his hollow cheek.

"Where's your boss?" snapped Hatfield.

"Nick?" The man shuttled a glance around that didn't stick long to Hatfield's hard stare. "I don't know. He stepped out. Is there anything I can do, Mr. Hatfield?"

The Ranger slapped his key down on the desk sharply. "You can give me another room, one without accommodations for a bushwhacker outside. When you get around to it, there's broken glass to clean up in the room I had, from the window somebody broke trying to drill a slug through my head."

Harry Dodge touched a tongue to his split lip. "I—heard the shooting, Mr. Hatfield. I hope you don't think—"

"Let it go!" the Ranger retorted, in no mood to listen to apologies, whether sincere or not. "Just give me another key."

"Yes, sir!" The clerk's hand trembled as he hastened to take a key off its hook on a board beside the desk. "You'll find that room all right, I can promise you. And if there's anything—"

Hatfield dismissed him with a nod, palming the key. Over at the door to the bar he saw curious eyes staring at him, hostile eyes. He gave the staring men no more than a glance, then turned to the stairs and climbed them to the second floor.

The new room was furnished precisely like the other. He checked the window

first, saw that it looked out on an open space between the hotel and its nearest neighbor. It seemed safe enough, but he pulled the shade and placed the lamp in such a position that it would not throw his shadow on the window, before he lit the wick.

He went to the other room down the hall and got his warbag and bedroll from among the splinters of glass that littered the floor. Returning, he had the door of his new room locked and was unbuttoning his shirt, preparatory to washing up in the china bowl on the dresser, when a knock sounded at the door.

It was a small sound, but his nerves were tense, and his hand moved toward the holster hanging on the bedpost behind him. At another thought, his eyes narrowed. This *could* be the writer of the unsigned letter.

He called, "Just a minute!" and quickly rebuttoned his shirt and stuffed the tails into his waistband. But before moving to the door he picked up his gunbelts and buckled them into place, adjusting the hang of the holsters.

He flipped the key then, and opened the door.

He hardly knew what he expected, but his visitors surprised him. There were two of them, and neither seemed to fit this tawdry background of a cheap cowtown hotel. The man in advance was slim, of medium height, dressed in a neat sack suit and linen shirt and black string tie. He might have been in his late thirties, for his temples were prematurely touched with gray, but his skin held a contrastingly youthful texture.

THE other was a girl! Though she wore range garb—boots and blouse and divided riding skirt, and flat-topped hat held on brown curls with a chin-strap—there was an air of refinement about her that spoke of an Eastern background. Certainly her skin hadn't been baked and roughened by years of cow-country sunlight.

The man said, "Mr. Hatfield? We got your room number from the register downstairs. We'd like to talk to you if we may. This is Miss Virginia Burke, and my name is Laird Cameron."

The name struck a familiar note. Then Hatfield remembered having seen it stenciled on a window above the red brick bank. This man, then, would be the only attorney in Arbuckle.

Puzzled, the Ranger said, "Come in," and stood back, closing the door after they had entered. Something told him this meeting was not going to have anything to do with Duff Prager, or anonymous letters.

"Only one chair," he apologized, bringing it out from the wall. "Miss Burke?"

She shook her head, her eyes troubled. She was a pretty girl, but something about her spoke of a burden and the tiring strain it imposed.

"We don't want to take up your time," she said quickly. "This is most irregular, but I had to see you and I asked Laird to come with me." Her hands knotted together nervously as she tilted her head to look up at the tall Ranger. "You *must* listen to me, Mr. Hatfield! You see, I know why you're here, and who sent for you—"

"You do?" said Hatfield. That was more than he knew himself.

She nodded soberly. "Yes. One of our riders saw you this afternoon at the fence, talking to Oral Gant and his foreman, and—" She made a hopeless gesture. "Oh, I'll have to make myself clearer! I am nurse and secretary to old Mr. Allenbow of the Broad A. I know what you must have been told about him, but none of it's true! I've got to make you believe me—before you let Oral Gant lead you into a bad mistake!"

So that was it! The irony of it almost put a smile on the Ranger's lips. Gant had pulled a gun on him, thinking he had been sent by Nels Allenbow, and now here was someone from the Broad A jumping to exactly the opposite conclusion.

He said, "I begin to understand, I think. I noticed the rider this afternoon. He told your boss that Gant had brought me into this fence fight, and Allenbow sent you to

try and buy me off?"

"That's not so!" Laird Cameron broke in quickly. "Nels Allenbow didn't send her. He doesn't know anything at all about her coming to see you, and probably wouldn't like it if he did! But I agreed with Virginia that it would be wisest if all the cards were on the table. After all, I know something about you, Hatfield—and the Lone Wolf has a reputation for fairness!"

Hatfield let this go, though he didn't believe it was meant purely as flattery. He said, "I don't quite see yet how Allenbow's affairs concern either of you."

"I happen to be his legal adviser," Cameron explained. "And Virginia—Miss Burke—is worried about his health. Nels isn't a well man, Mr. Hatfield, and the trouble with Gant has put a bad strain on him."

Hatfield said, "I see."

"I'm not sure you do!" Virginia Burke told him. "This means my job, of course, but more than that—Mr. Allenbow is such an old man, and so lonely! He hasn't many friends. He's not an easy man to be friendly with, I suppose. If you don't understand about him you may be tempted to believe anything Gant tries to tell you."

The lawyer said, "The rustling Gant complains of was done by a foreman of Allenbow's—a no-good by the name of Shack Turpin. Allenbow, being crippled with a broken hip, can't get around much and it took him awhile to learn what Shack was up to. As soon as he did learn he fired the man off the Broad A without an hour's notice, and told him never to show his ugly face in the Panhandle again. And believe me, Turpin hasn't been heard from since. That's the kind of man Allenbow is!"

CAMERON'S adjective, used to describe the discharged foreman prompted Hatfield to say, "I'd like to know more about this Turpin."

Virginia Burke said, with a little shudder, "I was afraid of him. I can't imagine why Mr. Allenbow ever hired him, except that he did seem to know a lot about cattle."

"Could you describe him?"

She made a helpless gesture. "Well, his face had sort of a—squashed look, if you understand what I'm trying to say. And his hair was more like the fur of an animal—"

She gave it up, but Hatfield thought no one could have painted a better word picture of the man who had tried to put a bullet through him from the lean-to roof beneath his window, not an hour before!

Laird Cameron said, "Well, what about it, Hatfield? We've done what we could. We've spread our cards. Have you any answer for us?"

The girl put in, "We may be all wrong, of course. Mr. Hatfield hasn't admitted that Gant sent for him. For all we know he may be in Arbuckle on an entirely different matter."

The Ranger made his decision. On the matter of Duff Prager he realized there was not much he could do until the author of the anonymous letter should make himself known, and pass on the promised information. Meanwhile, here thrown in his lap was an excellent excuse for his presence in the Panhandle.

So he said, "I can tell you this much—Gant didn't send for me. I promise to keep in mind what you've told me. And having already heard Oral Gant's point of view on this fence trouble, I think next I'd better talk to Allenbow. Tomorrow, maybe."

"Fine!" exclaimed Cameron, a pleased smile breaking through the rather stiff formality he had worn since entering the room. "Why not ride out with me? I'll be going to the ranch in the morning on business."

"Good enough."

And then Virginia Burke had his hand in both of hers. "Thank you," she said with feeling, "for listening to us. I know you can work this out. Only—I'd just as soon you didn't say anything to Mr. Allenbow about my coming to you. He might be angry if he thought I had meddled in something that was none of my affair."

"Not a word," said Hatfield, smiling. "I promise."

Then the door was open and as they left Cameron gave him a firm handshake. "It's good," the lawyer said, "to see the law come into this lawless country. In the morning, then. I'll pick you up here at the hotel."

Closing the door, and turning the key again in the lock, Jim Hatfield was thinking that what he had ridden into was a pretty complicated tangle. None of the loose ends tied in with any others.

Or did they?

Jim Hatfield was a man who played his hunches, and now one of them sent him out of the hotel again, along the lamp-splashed street to a one-room building which marked the farthest reach of the telegraph into this section of the Panhandle.

The coded message he put on the wire for Ranger Headquarters in Austin contained a brief description of the cow-stealing, bushwhacking ex-foreman of the Broad A, Shack Turpin. And it asked:

> Can you find out if anyone of this name or description was connected in any way with the Prager case?

It probably would draw a blank. Nevertheless, long chances did occasionally pay off.

CHAPTER IV

Visitors With Guns

MORNING was as bright and blue as the unvarying fine days that had preceded it. Even the winds that walked the high plains warmed quickly to the touch of the sun, and the cold of the past night was quickly forgotten.

"Looks like more nice weather," Hatfield observed as he slipped onto the counter stool at the Clover Leaf lunchroom to order breakfast.

The bald-headed proprietor looked at him askance. "Don't let it fool you," he muttered darkly. "We're going to have a storm."

"How do you figure? There are no clouds, not the slightest hint of a change."

"I told you," the man said doggedly, "I was raised with the Comanches. Injuns have ways of knowing such things, and I can tell you it's a-coming all right. I give it forty-eight hours."

Well, naturally, with the season as late as this a change within a matter of minutes was always possible. But predicting it was a different proposition. Hatfield put the man down as an eccentric, and let it go.

Breakfast eaten, he went to the stable for Goldy and got a whickered greeting. Hatfield saddled and rode back to the hotel where he tied up at the long, tooth-marked hitch-pole. When he mounted the steps to the gallery he found Nick Ide waiting there for him, thumbs stuck into the arm-holes of his flowered waistcoat.

"Ah—Mr. Hatfield! They told me you'd already left. I was hoping for a chance to tell you how damned sorry I am about last night."

"What? Oh." The Ranger shrugged. "No harm done, except a busted window, and that's out of *your* pocket!"

Ide gestured with the cigar he'd taken from his chiseled flat lips. "Beside the point! Do you suppose I like the fact that an officer of the law can't put up at my place without finding himself the target for ambush bullets? I've been making a thorough inquiry, but so far I've turned up nobody who saw the bushwhacker. Looks like a cold trail. In a town as remote as this one, I suppose you're bound to have some scum or other that panics at sight of a law badge."

"I suppose." Hatfield shook his head at the cigar Ide offered.

The hotel man asked, too casually, as he indicated the golden sorrel waiting at the foot of the steps, "Riding on?"

"I expect to be back in town by evening."

For an instant curiosity and disappointment struggled in the man's cold eyes.

But getting no more answer than this he put the smile back in place.

"Maybe, then," he suggested pleasantly, "you'd have time to work in a game tonight? If you care for cards, that is."

"Why, it might be. I—"

"Better watch out, Hatfield," a voice behind them said. "You're being baited into a wolf's den!"

Both turned as Laird Cameron stepped out on the lobby doorway and walked toward them. The lawyer was dressed for a day's riding, in boots and whipcord breeches and corduroy jacket.

He said, a tight smile touching his lips, "If you care about hanging onto any of that Ranger pay, you'll want to think twice about bucking the games in Nick Ide's!"

Hatfield heard Ide's quick catch of breath and saw black murder in the stare Ide gave the lawyer. But quickly the man had control of himself, and he forced a smile to his lips. He even laughed a little, coldly.

"Your jokes are kind of personal, Cameron," he grunted. "Might give a stranger the wrong impression."

The two shared a look that held a thinly veiled hostility. Then Cameron shrugged and looked at the Ranger. "Ready to ride, if you are. I was just asking for you at the desk."

"All ready," said Hatfield. He nodded to Ide and turned down the steps to his waiting sorrel.

Cameron had a mount saddled and tied nearby. As they mounted and rode out of the quiet town, Hatfield knew that Nick Ide remained on the porch of his hotel and gambling hall, watching them until they were out of sight.

AS THEY rode across the sun-browned land, Hatfield looked with interest at the man beside him. He had seen enough to suspect that Arbuckle citizens walked wide of Nick Ide, respectful of his power and afraid to antagonize him. He had run across only two men who showed any signs of defiance—the cripple at the lunchroom, who was probably too unimportant for notice, and this Laird Cameron of the quiet manner, who nevertheless seemed to have a devil of recklessness lurking back of his gray eyes. Cameron seemed unafraid to call the man a thief to his face, scarcely hiding the charge behind a quip.

Neither spoke of the incident, however. Instead, Laird Cameron remarked, "I've been hearing talk about someone who tried to put a bullet through your skull last night. Virginia and I heard the shooting when we were talking in my office, but I didn't know until later that you'd been the target. You certainly didn't give any hint of it!"

Hatfield was near to telling him that it was the rustling ex-foreman, Shack Turpin, who had made the attempt on his life, but let the matter pass.

"That girl," he said changing the subject. "She's not native to these parts, is she? She impressed me as being an Easterner, and well-educated."

"You're pretty observant. Yes, she came out from Pennsylvania. Her parents died about a year ago, and when I advertised for someone to take care of old Nels Allenbow and handle the ranch books, she wrote me. After some correspondence I hired her for the job." He added seriously, "I'm afraid I did her no favor. Allenbow is a hard man to get along with—as maybe you'll see when you meet him. He makes things pretty difficult for Virginia." He sighed with deep bitterness. "It's damned hard to be poor sometimes, isn't it?"

The Ranger said nothing, but he thought he understood. Laird Cameron was a proud man, and hardly wealthy, with his income from a cowtown attorney's office. Likely enough he was in love with the Burke girl, but in no position yet to support a wife. In his own chosen way of life, Jim Hatfield did not often give much thought to marriage, yet he could readily understand how Virginia Burke could affect a man that way. She was a thoroughly sweet and attractive person.

They rode in silence, after this, across miles of grass and mesquite heavy with

fine beef carrying the Broad A brand, until the buildings of the ranch loomed ahead of them. A good-sized outfit, its buildings were large and weathered by the scouring of the winds and baking of the sun. Cottonwoods stood as a windbreak along the north side of the layout, and the sear leaves were tumbling lazily from their branches, skidding across the hard-packed dust, collecting in dry drifts in the hollows.

A bunch of mounted men was in the yard before the house, just sitting their horses in an uneven grouping. On the veranda, in the sun, a white-haired man sat in a wheel-chair, a blanket across his wasted legs.

As they cantered in toward the ranch, Cameron exclaimed, "Say! That's Oral Gant's roan! What's he doing on the Broad A?"

Hatfield had already marked the Horseshoe brand on some of the other horses. Mike Maugher also was there, sitting his saddle near his boss, a solid shape in the leather.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

DOG-GONE

ON ACCOUNT of the heat, the boys were sitting in the shade of the bunkhouse fanning the breeze, and maybe because this was one of the real dog days of summer, they got on the subject of the fastest dogs they'd ever known—and to hear them tell it, they had sure known some fast ones.

Old Jim Hawkins just sat there puffing on his pipe, saying nary a word, till the boys had run out of breath. Then he said, "Well, boys, you have known some pretty spry hounds, seems like, but let me tell you about one I come acrost one time, which I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't saw it with my own eyes.

"It was while I was a conductor on the B.M. & N. Railroad that a feller gets aboard with the biggest, lankiest dog I ever see. He sets down in the seat and Mr. Dog perches hisself straight up on the seat beside him. I told him dogs weren't allowed on the coaches and that he would have to remove him.

"Well, sir, he about bowls me over with what he says then. 'Would there be any objections,' he says, 'to tiein' him on the end of the train?' I thought he was joking at first, but when I seen he wasn't, I gets him a length of rope, and danged if he don't tie the critter to the rear car, sure enough.

"I mentioned it to Dick Turner, the engineer, and he perdicted the hound would be made into sausage meat in not to exceed thirty seconds. I don't know how fast it happened, being busy collecting tickets like I was, but when I finished I went back and took a look—and of course there was nothing left but a piece of broke rope dangling in the breeze.

"I felt a little sorry for the owner, but figured it served the danged fool right, after all, for being such a danged fool. When I told him about it, though, he wasn't fazed a bit. Just kind of smiled and went on reading, calm as you please.

"That's the end of the yarn, except to say that when we pulled into the next station there was the dog waiting for us, and not even breathing hard."

—W. L. Hudson

Laird Cameron said, "Looks like they've brought the entire outfit. And no sign of an Allenbow rider!" His voice held alarm.

Over in the doorway of the kitchen shack, a Chinese cook showed his frightened yellow face. On the porch, standing behind the crippled cowman's wheel-chair, Hatfield now saw Virginia Burke, looking pale and worried. Except for these, Gant and the seven riders with him seemed to have taken over the Broad A headquarters.

Cameron kicked his horse ahead and Hatfield kept Goldy at his stirrup. The Horseshoe bunch looked around quickly as they rode into the yard. Cameron rode directly to the veranda railing and, speaking from the saddle, demanded:

"What's up, Nels?"

NELS ALLENBOW was a gaunt and wasted figure, the flesh of his throat in folds like turkey wattles. His blue eyes were faded but still fierce behind heavy, red-rimmed lids. He sat hunched over in the wheel-chair, both hands beneath the blanket that covered his knees. He answered Cameron in a high, grating cry:

"Lies! More rotten, lying talk about the Broad A cutting wire and rustling cattle—and I've had to sit and listen to it! Damned good thing you showed up!"

"Brought your Ranger with him, I notice!" Oral Gant put in, his mouth bitter under the down-drooping roan mustache. "All right, Hatfield! Here's something you can go to work on. Thirty head of prime beef gone since yesterday—and a panel of wire cut to pieces over west of Buzzard Creek. I've had enough of this, I tell you!"

"So you and your entire crew came to threaten a sick old man," Laird Cameron snapped, before Hatfield could answer. "That sounds like a Horseshoe trick, all right!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when an angry curse broke from big Mike Maugher. Before anyone could have stopped him a kick of spurs against flanks sent the black-headed Horseshoe foreman's gelding lunging at the lawyer's mount, his big hands reaching. Cameron lifted an arm to ward him off but Maugher knocked it aside, grabbed a handful of the man's coat. Cloth gave with a ripping sound. The horses danced apart and the two men went out of saddle into the dust.

They landed heavily, the blow half-stunning Maugher and giving the lighter man a chance to scramble to his feet. But Maugher was quick to follow and he went after the lawyer. A sweeping hook of his right fist caught Cameron in the chest and the lawyer's face went white with pain as he stumbled back against the veranda.

He tried to return a defensive blow but his fist merely bounced off the foreman's heavily-muscled shoulder. Maugher seemed blinded with fury. He closed with Cameron while men shouted excitedly.

Above them, on the porch, Virginia Burke clutched the railing with trembling hands and cried, "Stop! Oh, somebody please stop them!"

It was Jim Hatfield who got to the struggling men, leaning from Goldy's back to grasp Maugher by a shoulder and pull him, reeling, away from his victim. Cameron sagged against the edge of the porch, panting and groping at his bruised throat.

Maugher at once subsided. He looked at his hands, then at Hatfield.

"What's the matter with you?" growled Hatfield. "A thing like this doesn't solve anything!"

A kind of shame colored the foreman's angry stare, as though he only now realized the unfair advantage his size and condition gave him over the man he had attacked. He lifted his eyes to Virginia Burke's scornful look, as quickly dropped them and turned to bend down and fumble for the hat he had lost in the fight.

Jim Hatfield had turned on the glowering Horseshoe owner. "Now, Gant, if you'll show me just where this latest bunch of beef was stolen, maybe we can get somewhere. Sign ought to be fresh enough still."

The rancher shook his head, snorting. "Lot of good we could hope to do! They run the stuff up and lose it in the Canadian

brakes. Hell, don't you suppose I've tried, before, to trace the stuff they made off with?"

Leaning forward in his wheel-chair, old Allenbow was studying the Ranger through narrowed lids. "You're Jim Hatfield?" he demanded sharply. "Then I'd have credited you with sense enough to know when a man's lying his head off! Gant couldn't fool a blind yearling calf!"

Oral Gant jerked stiffly erect, and crimson swept into his features. "Why, you old—" And, standing in stirrups, fist raised, he began to hurl curses at the old man on the porch, a blistering tirade of wrath that set the crippled cowman's eyes to blazing.

"Gant!" snapped Hatfield. "That'll do!"

The Horseshoe owner had whipped about as though to start in on him—when they heard the girl's sudden outcry, and a quick sound of scuffling on the porch. Old Allenbow, with his enemy's glance at last turned from him, had jerked an arm from under the blanket and his trembling hand held the sixgun that had been hidden there.

VIRGINIA BURKE had his wrist in both her hands, fighting to deflect his aim as he tried to draw a bead on Gant's head. Allenbow seemed surprisingly wiry, for all his illness, and she almost failed. The gun exploded, drilling a bullet harmlessly through the veranda roof. Then she had managed to wrest the weapon from his fingers.

The roar of the gun seemed to loose nerves already strung taut. More than one hand jerked toward a holstered weapon but Jim Hatfield moved fastest. Already he had both guns out and leveled, covering the Horseshoe men. His voice rapped a warning.

"All right! We'll break this up before somebody does get murdered! Gant, take your men and get out of here! I'm still willing to meet you at Buzzard Creek in half an hour, if you change your mind about working with me."

"The hell with you!" snapped Gant, taking up the reins as the blue smoke from Allenbow's gun drifted and dissolved in the sunlight and the steady wind. "I'll settle my own damned wars. I don't need no outside law butting in to take my enemy's side." He jerked the reins to wheel his horse, and gave his riders an authoritative nod. "Come on!"

They went streaming away in a quick break of hoofsound. Big Mike Maugher flung himself into saddle and joined the tail of the cavalcade. They swept out of the Broad A yard, and the sear prairie grass muffled their hoofs as they headed back toward Horseshoe, and their own side of the barbed wire barrier.

Jim Hatfield turned back to the veranda —just in time to hear the sound of an open-handed blow and to see Virginia Burke go reeling backward from Nels Allenbow's upraised arm.

Allenbow cried harshly, "Don't you ever lay a hand on me again, you hussy!"

CHAPTER V

Lost Trails

VIRGINIA stared at Allenbow a moment, her face white and the mark of his hand turning crimson on her cheek. Then tears of pain and humiliation welled into her eyes and blindly she whirled and ran into the house, the screen door jangling behind her. Laird Cameron, halfway up the steps, called her name. Then, his face gone as white as the girl's, he was striding over to stand above the man in the wheel-chair. His hands worked spasmodically. He looked wild, disheveled as he was from his encounter with Mike Maugher.

"You ought to be horsewhipped!" he cried, stung to fury. "Cripple or no cripple! And damned if I don't feel like doing it myself!"

Allenbow merely glared at him, his sagging old face fallen into sardonic lines. "Yes?"

"Don't you realize that girl is the only

friend you've got left in the world—the only one you haven't driven away with your nasty meanness?"

Nels Allenbow's heavy lids drooped a little more over his eyes, but they gleamed sharply behind them.

"Interesting," he murmured, "to know how you feel about it. Could be you ain't interested any more in handling my legal business, either. That so? Maybe I ought to bring in some other lawyer from Fort Worth, maybe set him up with an office in Arbuckle. That would about fix *you*, lad!"

Jim Hatfield, standing beside Goldy and looking up at that scene on the veranda, saw the threat strike Cameron, saw it hollow out his cheeks, and set his hands to trembling a little.

"Yes!" exclaimed the lawyer softly. "You could do that, all right. Go ahead! I'm only warning you—you'd better lay off that girl, or she'll quit you, bad as she needs the job. And then what would you do? Because, Nels, you need her, too—even worse!"

There was a moment's silence. Nels Allenbow's baleful stare ate into Cameron's white face. Then, ever so slowly, the look changed, as Cameron's words sank home. Allenbow's seamed face lost its belligerence, became baffled, then settled into a sour and defeated scowl. He looked away from Cameron, looked at Hatfield, and then at the wasted hands lying on his crippled knees.

Finally his thin chest swelled and he lifted his head, called over a shoulder toward the house door:

"Girl!"

Nothing happened for a moment. Then they heard her footsteps coming slowly toward the door. She paused there, dim behind the screen.

"Come here!" ordered Allenbow.

She hesitated, then pushed the door open and stepped out onto the porch. She was still pale, and the tears were wet upon her cheeks and now and then a sob shook her.

"What do you want?" she asked dully.

Apology came hard to the old man. His hands twitched and he stared straight ahead of him into the sunlit yard, before blurting out the words with an effort.

"I'm sorry! I lost my head, and you kept me from doing somethin' I'd have been mighty sorry for. Thanks!" He gulped, then went on gruffly, "I know I ain't easy to get along with, but it's damned hard to be old, and sick, and without kith nor kin to bother whether you stay alive or not. Put up with my cussedness, girl. I'm asking you please to try. You won't be sorry for it."

He waited, and the other two men looked from him to the girl for her answer. Unpleasant an old man as he was, Hatfield couldn't help feeling a little twinge of pity for him just then.

Perhaps Virginia couldn't, either. She sniffed a little, and wiped a cheek with her hand. She was still hurt, and there was no warmth in her voice, but she said, stiffly:

"All—all right, Mr. Allenbow. We won't say any more about it."

She turned and went quickly back into the house. Laird Cameron, his face still chalk-white with anger, and his hands clenched, looked at Nels Allenbow for a moment in indecision. Then he wheeled and followed the weeping girl inside, and Hatfield heard him call her name as he hurried to overtake her.

HATFIELD had dismounted and was standing beside his horse. As he turned to grab the saddle-horn and give the rig a shake to ease the weight of it on Goldy's back, old Allenbow's sullen stare came to rest upon him. Allenbow drummed bony fingers on the arms of his wheel-chair, shaggy white brows drawn down.

He said shortly, "So you think you can put an end to this fence trouble? It's a big order, even for a man of your rep, Hatfield! You seen enough to convince you of that, yet?"

Before answering, the Ranger came up the steps, put his weight against the veranda rail, and began to build a smoke. "I've always noticed," he replied then, nodding, "that the worst fights come when

men who have been friends have a falling out."

"Friends!" Allenbow thundered. "What makes you think I ever had anything to do with that lying Gant hombre?"

Hatfield lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "All right, maybe I'm wrong. But the trail between these two spreads sure looks like it had seen quite a bit of travel before the fence cut it off. I judged from that."

"You use your eyes, don't you?" the old man grunted. "Well," he conceded, grudgingly, "I admit he fooled me for a time, when he first come in here and took up graze along the south edge of my range. Even used to waste a lot of my evenings beating the man at checkers. Until he finally showed his true colors!"

"I understood the trouble all began through a renegade foreman of yours. Fellow named Shack Turpin."

"Yeah, there was that. But I put a stop to his shenanigans quick enough—and it wasn't until after I'd got rid of Shack that Gant started building his damned fence. He'd already lost any excuse he had."

"Then you don't believe what he says about losing more cattle?"

Allenbow snorted explosively. "Hell, no! Not for a minute!"

"And I suppose it hasn't occurred to you that Turpin might still be around, working on Gant's herds and causing bad blood between you?"

"Why would he do that? What would it get him?" Allenbow shook his head emphatically. "Let me tell you, Hatfield! Gant's shown no evidence that he couldn't just as easily have faked himself —some wire cut, some cattle sign that loses itself in the brakes of the Canadian. Just enough to make it sound good, so's he can keep that fence up. And as long as it stands, there can be no peace between us—because it's too damned plain what he's figuring on."

"I wish you'd tell me."

The old man gave him a scornful, sideward look. "You claim to know this High Plains country? Don't you savvy what happens to cattle here, when a bad winter hits?"

"Certainly," retorted Hatfield. "Stock drifts before a storm, and if it comes against a barrier it piles up and dies there in its tracks." He nodded, his eyes narrowing at the thought. "Is that what you're hinting at?"

"So you do maybe have some sense to back up that reputation! Yeah, you've hit the point square. We've had us a run of mild winters, so we should be about due for a bad one to break. Let a blue norther blow down this way, and you'll see Gant's wire make a perfect trap for Broad A cattle. Why, he could ruin me overnight, then take and add my range to his own! *That's* what he's working towards! And that's why the fence has got to come down!"

His words were still ringing along the silent porch as Laird Cameron emerged from the house. Cameron had calmed his anger but his manner was still coldly distant.

He said, "I brought those papers with me, Mr. Allenbow. If you'll sign them I can be getting back to town."

"Time enough for that, Cameron!" snapped Allenbow. "I'm talking to Hatfield right now."

The Ranger saw Cameron begin to bridle and quickly he straightened from the railing where he sat, tossing his smoked-down quirly butt across the bannister into the dust.

"I was thinking I'd better go take my look at this latest sign Gant was talking about," he said. "I promised." He spoke quickly, to forestall a protest from the old man. "How do I find Buzzard Creek?"

ALLENBOW scowled but did not argue. "Ed Romaine will show you," he grunted, nodding past Hatfield toward the sound of a quick-moving horse coming in toward the yard. "My foreman," he explained.

Hatfield watched the man ride in on a dusty grulla mare, excitement plainly weighting him. He was a spare, rope-hard man, grizzled and seamed. He brought his

horse to a grit-spurting stand, and said:

"I caught sight of Gant and a big bunch of men, looked like they might have been here making trouble."

"They was here," Allenbow told him curtly. "Didn't have a chance to make much trouble."

Apparently not considering it important enough to satisfy his foreman's anxious curiosity, he introduced Jim Hatfield and told why the Ranger wanted a look at Buzzard Creek. Romaine eyed the Ranger with respect, and accepted his orders with a nod.

"All right, Hatfield," he said. "Come along."

When they rode out of the yard toward the line of the disputed fence, Cameron and the old man were discussing the legal papers the lawyer had brought with him from his office.

"Nice country," Hatfield ventured, after they had ridden for some minutes without talk, to the accompaniment of saddle-creaking and jingling of bridle chains.

Romaine shrugged. In his smoky eyes was a brooding look as he gazed across the brown stretches of burnt-over range dotted with mesquite.

"All right, if you like it. Too flat and open for me. And that damned wind that never lets up! Sort of wears on a gent's nerves. Don't reckon I'll ever get used to it."

"You're not from this part of the country?"

The ramrod shook his grizzled head. "Brasada man—had my own place down on the Nueces, before I finally lost it."

He hadn't said much, but it was enough to tell Hatfield a lot about Ed Romaine. It wouldn't be easy for a man of his age, who had bucked the tough reaches of the brush country and carved out his spread, to have to find himself working for someone else, especially one as difficult to get along with as the high-handed Nels Allenbow. On top of that it was plain to see that these windswept plains would have him constantly roweled by the dull ache of homesickness for the brasada he had left behind.

A strange land, this, of discontented men. Romaine, and Mike Maugher with his unexplained grudge against the world; the lunchroom cook, bothered by a game leg, and Laird Cameron hampered by the poverty of a cowtown law office; Virginia Burke, and the frightened hotel clerk, Harry Dodge. Oral Gant and Nels Allenbow, feuding over a fence and missing cattle. Was there anyone, anywhere in this part of the Panhandle who was satisfied with the cards that had been dealt him?

They came, after a while, to a barranca that held a shallow trickle of water.

"Buzzard Creek," Romaine said shortly.

Crossing it, they picked up the sun-bright line of the drift fence—a line broken where the newly cut strands had not yet been repaired. No Horseshoe riders were in sight, but both men could read the markings of the ground easily enough without anyone to point them out.

"Yeah," said Romaine, straightening in saddle, "if you can believe the sign, cattle's been run through here overnight, and pushed thataway toward the Canadian. A dozen head, or thereabouts."

"Sounds like a risky operation," Hatfield murmured, as he pushed his hat back on his head and squinted in the direction the foreman pointed. "They'd have to cut the fence, then take the stuff from under Gant's nose and run it clear across your range."

"Not as hard as it looks. It would take an army to patrol this graze. We can't even try."

The trace was plain and they lost little time in following it as it wavered in a generally straight line, north and west. There were the shoe marks, too, of the horsemen who had pushed the cattle—three riders, enough to handle this small jag of steers and keep them moving at a good rate.

An hour passed, with neither man speaking. The wind had a chill edge, but the deceptive heat of the late sun drew sweat from them and darkened their shirts, made them stick to their shoulders.

FINALLY the ground began to rough up, and stock trails converged toward the river ahead. Then the trail led into a dry coulee and the brakes claimed and buried it.

Past rains had done their work, eating away the soil and cutting down to underlying shale and rock that took no sign. Below, in its broad bed, the Canadian flowed between broken walls of red and mauve and yellow. Hatfield and Romaine rode down to it and along its banks that were cut by the hooves of watering stock, but could discover no more fresh sign.

"Easy enough to lose us," Ed Romaine said finally. "Maybe they run 'em down to Tascosa, or on to New Mexico. I wouldn't know."

Hatfield looked at him. "At least, you seem willing to admit that Gant has really been losing beef. You don't agree with your boss that he's faking?"

"Allenbow jumps to conclusions. Me, I ain't ready to say what it means. I do know this—the Broad A hasn't been losing any stock. That's what mainly concerns me. Though it's hard to understand why a rustler would go after Gant's stock, and have to cut a fence to get it, while plenty of good beef this side of the wire goes untouched."

"You took over as foreman when Shack Turpin was fired?" Hatfield wanted to know. Receiving a nod he added, "Any idea what became of Turpin afterward? Or who he might have been working with?"

The question got him a sharp glance. "Why all the questions about Shack Turpin? He's not been seen in this country for close onto a year now."

Hatfield shrugged and let it go. He could give the man a shock by telling him that only the night before Turpin had drilled a bullet at him through a hotel window, but it would gain him nothing.

As they turned back, Hatfield spotted the sod roof of a cabin, half-hidden among the brush of a coulee.

[*Turn page*]

Carhartt

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"Line camp," Romaine told him when he pointed it out. "We haven't used it, these dry summers."

"Let's take a look, anyway."

The building was falling into disrepair, the roof sagging. There was no sound except the buzz of insects and the rattle of the wind in encroaching brush but, riding up, Hatfield pointed to fresh droppings in the mesquite-pole corral beside the cabin.

Inside was dust, but also evidence that someone had used the cabin in recent weeks. But Ed Romaine showed no surprise.

"Tramps drift through, heading for Tascosa—or away from a sheriff. Likely they lay over a night or two, from time to time. No rustlers have made permanent camp here, if that's what you're thinking."

That seemed fairly obvious. Hatfield said, "I just wanted to look."

They went back to their horses, checked the cinches, and swung up for the ride back to the Broad A.

So far, it seemed to the Lone Wolf that he was only marking time, getting nowhere. It was a complicated setup he had ridden into, but the angles added up to exactly nothing—nothing, certainly, bearing on the chore which had originally brought him here.

CHAPTER VI

Summons at Dawn

IN TOWN again by late afternoon, Hatfield stopped first to check at the telegraph office, but there was no answer to his wire. When he mounted again to ride on to the livery, he saw the old lunchroom proprietor lounging against a roof post in front of his place of business, favoring his game leg, apron tucked up around his middle. Hatfield reined Goldy to a halt.

Leaning a forearm across the saddlehorn he said, "Thought you said it was going to storm?"

The man squinted at the bright sun in the pale, cloudless sky. "I told you forty-eight hours, remember?" he grunted. "Just wait awhile."

"You mean you're still sticking to it?"

His skeptical grin straightened the other man, his eyes glinting.

"Go on—laugh!" the old fellow snarled. "I tell you, I know what I'm talking about. I learned from the Comanches, and them red fellers are never wrong!"

"All right," said the Ranger. "I'll have my earmuffs ready."

But with his thoughts on other matters he had put the old eccentric out of his mind by the time he reached the stable. He gave Goldy his usual strict attention, checking his hoofs and any possible signs of saddle galling on the sorrel's sleek, handsome hide. Satisfied, he started for the hotel.

Though it was broad day, thought of last night's ambush attempt and of the possible presence here of the murderer, Duff Prager, put an unwonted stiffening in the muscles at the base of his neck, kept his glance moving ceaselessly. And when he was passing the squat red brick bank building and a sharp sound broke the stillness just behind and above him, he spun with instinctive quickness and placed his shoulders to the wall, while a lean hard hand shot holsterward.

But it was only a second-story window being run up quickly. Laird Cameron's head appeared. The lawyer called down:

"Jim! Just a minute!"

A little chagrined because of his own tight nerves, Hatfield shoved the half-drawn gun back into leather.

"I'll be right up," he called back, and headed for the outside stairs which angled up the side of the building.

Cameron's rooms were about what the Ranger had expected. There was a cheap, battered desk, a couple of heavy chairs with the black leather seats hard and cracked with age, shelves lined with law books which Cameron likely had bought by the lot from some other cowtown attorney who had finally gone broke. A

picture of George Washington hung on the wall, but none of Lincoln—natural enough, this being Texas and not many years after the War Between the States. Through a door Hatfield had a glimpse of living quarters—an iron cot, a wardrobe, a chair or two.

It was the layout of a man long on perseverance and hope, but with small results to show for his dogged determination to build a successful law practice here in the Panhandle.

Cameron had taken a bottle and a couple of glasses from a desk drawer and was already pouring when Hatfield came in.

"Have a drink? He set a glass on the corner of the desk for the Ranger. "I just wanted to know if you found anything out there today."

Hatfield shook his head, dropping into a chair as he picked up the liquor. "Sign petered out," he said. "Toward the Canadian." The whisky was good stock, and it cut the dust that had lodged in his throat from miles of riding.

"Damn!" exclaimed the lawyer with sudden fierceness, his knuckles white as he gripped his glass. "I hope you can lick this thing, Jim! If there was only something I could do—anything! Not that I give a damn about old Allenbow," he admitted, harshly. "But you saw how it is. When he's crossed he takes it out on Virginia—and I can't stand that!"

"You think a lot of her, don't you?" Hatfield asked slowly.

Cameron put down his glass, the whisky untasted. "I'm responsible for her. I brought her into this, and—" He made an impatient gesture. "Why lie to myself? I love her, Jim! I'd ask her to marry me in a minute if I could only afford to take her away from that heartbreaking mess at the Broad A. But you can see how near I come to that!"

A SWEEP of his hand indicated the poverty-stricken office, with its shabby furnishings.

"A slow business, building this into anything worth having. Without Allenbow's account, I frankly couldn't stay open, and that wasn't an idle threat he made about bringing in a new man to set up in competition to me. He's just mean enough, and rich enough, to do it out of spite. He would, too, if I tried to take Virginia out of that house. He's utterly dependent on her, and knows it." Cameron shook his head wearily, and picked up the whisky glass. "A damned mess!" he grunted, and drained the liquor at a single toss.

"Tough, all right," Hatfield agreed.

But immediately a change came over the lawyer. "This isn't what I brought you up here for!" he exclaimed. "To grouse about my own troubles! I was hoping you'd turned up something, or at least knew of a way I could be of help."

"I can't think of anything," the Ranger said, getting to his feet. "But if I do, I'll let you know."

"Have another?"

The Ranger shook his head. "Thanks—my limit."

Putting the cork back in the bottle, Cameron repeated, "Remember, if there's anything at all you want to ask of me, you won't hesitate to do it?"

"It's a promise," Hatfield said, smiling.

He left the shabby office and went on to the hotel. Harry Dodge, at the desk, gave him a peculiar look but shook his head when the Ranger, stopping for his key, wanted to know if there had been any messages.

No word from the letter writer yet. It must have been a hoax, a pretty tasteless one, at that. Hatfield went to his room and washed up, replaced his sweaty, dusty shirt in preparation for evening and another meal at the Clover Leaf.

When he had finished eating and returned to the hotel, he glanced into the barroom. A pretty good business was being done, and all the games were going. He would have turned away but Nick Ide caught sight of him and came over, smiling and trailing a plume of smoke from the inevitable cigar clamped in a corner of his mouth.

"Evening," the man said. "How about that game we mentioned, Hatfield?"

The Ranger hesitated. He was not interested in cards tonight. But thought of the evening ahead, with nothing to do except sit around a bleak hotel room waiting for the message that began to look as though it wouldn't come, decided him. He lifted his shoulders, indifferently.

"Why not?"

They played in Ide's private office and sitting room on the second floor, a well-set-up room that contrasted notably with the dingy poverty of Laird Cameron's. Ide had rounded up three other players, all of them prosperous—a whisky drummer, a rancher from up around Tascosa, a cattle buyer from Dodge City here to arrange for the next season's shipments. The night had turned crisp, though the sky was a clear blaze of diamonds that still belied the old lunchroom man's promised storm. A fire roared in a pot-bellied corner stove. It was part of Harry Dodge's duties of the evening to keep this fire going and the woodbox filled, as well as jump at Ide's command for drinks from the bar downstairs.

Hatfield, studying the clerk's nervous movements as he went about his work, read fear of his employer, but also caught looks of plain hatred directed at Ide when the saloonman's back was turned.

Nick Ide was not a spectacular player. He held his cards close to his flowered waistcoat and played them cautiously, never plunging much unless he held a sure hand. But when he did, he handled the play with a cool, shrewd strategy.

His real interest, however, seemed not on the game but on the lawman seated across the table from him. Quickly Hatfield sensed that the man was trying to pump him, with carefully timed and innocent-sounding questions seeking to catch him off-guard and draw from him some information concerning his purpose here on the High Plains.

BUT Hatfield turned down the whisky that was offered him, and kept a close guard on his tongue. As the evening progressed he saw Nick Ide grow surly over his lack of success in pumping him.

At eleven the game broke up, Hatfield neither a winner nor loser by much. Ide, scowling into his whisky glass, barely had the good grace to speak a civil good night. Half-amused, and with his curiosity about the saloon owner keenly whetted, Hatfield went up to his room and to bed, after carefully locking the door, and wedging a chair under the knob. . . .

He was awakened—he didn't know how much later—by the cautious scratching of fingers upon his door, and someone anxiously whispering his name:

"Mr. Hatfield! Mr. Hatfield—*please!*"

He came instantly awake, a hand moving to the gunbelt on the bed post convenient to his touch. But an inner voice told him, here it is!

Bed springs creaked a little as he swung his feet to the floor, throwing aside the blanket. The chill of predawn was in the room, and a faint light seeped through the window. He grunted tersely, "Yes?"

"Don't open the door!" the whisperer warned hastily. "Just tell me. Did—have you got a letter?"

Hatfield knew a quick tightening of excitement. He answered, "Without a signature? Yes, I've got it."

"I don't dare talk here. But there's an old shed right at the edge of town, a couple blocks west of the livery. That'll be safe enough. Meet me there in half an hour, and I promise to give you some information you can use." When the whisperer got no answer, he demanded anxiously, "Will you come?"

It could be a trap, of course. The whispering voice had about it something plaguingly familiar. The Ranger thought he should be able to place it, yet somehow could not. He debated silently, his palm hard against the butt of the gun in his hand. But when he answered it was to say:

"All right. I'll be there."

At once cautious, hurrying steps faded away along the hall. Hatfield leaped at once to the door, but by the time he could get the chair from beneath the knob and the key turned, whoever had been there was out of sight. The hall was silent and

empty, lighted only by the dim glow of a turned-down bracket lamp on the wall.

Frowning, Hatfield quietly closed the door. Jaw grim, he set about getting into his clothes.

Dawnlight was strengthening, but the streets were silent and ghostly. Hatfield believed he had made it out of the hotel without being noticed, and he kept to the back lots as he made his way toward the rendezvous through the bleak chill morning.

But the wide main street had to be crossed. He picked a corner, watched for signs of anyone being around before taking the crossing at a quick prowl. His boots seemed to grate harshly on the street's gritty surface. Wind moaned about the eaves of the houses as he reached the other side of the street and ducked into the opening between two buildings. There he paused and looked behind him.

Something drew his glance to the sky, visible above roof-edges overhead. And he saw then that what he had taken for the gray of paling night was instead a ceiling of cloud sheet through which the coming daylight was a greasy smear, turned red toward the eastern edge of the world. The weather must have changed overnight. Hatfield remembered the old man's prophecy then, and he frowned.

He went on between the buildings, and presently he saw the shed.

It stood apart, in a vacant lot littered with refuse. On this side a sagging door and a boarded window were visible. The door was shut. He considered the place for a moment, thinking it looked utterly deserted. And again the strong feeling that he could be walking into a trap assailed him.

Drawing his right-hand gun, he moved deliberately forward, conscious again of the grating of his boot steps. There was no other movement, no sound. Then, when only five yards from the doorway, came the sound of scuffling within and a voice cried:

"Stay back, Hatfield! They—"

THE voice broke off as though it had suddenly been muffled, but not before Jim Hatfield placed it. He knew now whose voice it was—the same voice that had whispered outside his door at the hotel. This knowledge hit him in the second it took to send him into motion—not in retreat, but straight ahead, with gun rising and shoulder braced to strike the closed door and fling it open.

It offered no resistance, and he had to catch at the side of the jamb to keep from stumbling headlong inside. There was a smell of stirred stale dust. Gray light which streaked through another half-open door showed him struggling figures. Two of them, holding a third.

He saw Shack Turpin's bestial features and he saw the hotel clerk, Harry Dodge, with Turpin's hand clamped across his mouth to prevent a further outburst. With frenzied eyes staring through the tousled hair that fell over them, Dodge was trying to warn Hatfield.

"Let him go!" snapped Hatfield, and fired.

Even at such close quarters he could not aim for the men grappling with the clerk, without the risk of injuring Dodge. But he put his bullet so close that it broke them apart effectually. Turpin's companion gave a squawk of fear and dived for the floor, loosing his hold on the prisoner. Shack Turpin, with more presence of mind, pulled the slight form of Dodge in front of him as a screen while he dug for a gun at his hip. But for an instant he had to free his prisoner's mouth, and Harry croaked in a strangled voice:

"Behind you!"

Too late, Hatfield whirled as the man who had waited behind the door loomed beside him. A hand went up to ward off the gleaming arc the descending gun-barrel made in the shack's gloom. The blow struck, crushingly, numbing his arm to the shoulder, and went on and landed against the side of his skull. His hat was knocked from his head and, with all the strength drained out of him, Jim Hatfield followed it down.

CHAPTER VII

Take the Trail!

BECAUSE the blow had been a glancing one, broken by Hatfield's upraised arm, it did not quite put him out, but it filled him with a numbing, nauseous weakness. He found himself on hands and knees, head throbbing and the tang of dust and blood in his nostrils. And he heard, as from a great distance, the voice that shouted harshly:

"Finish him, damn it! Make sure of him!"

A great effort of will tried to rouse his body to the danger, but it would not obey him. He could not reach for the gun he had dropped, or lift himself, or even raise his head out of the dirt that littered the floor. And, waiting through a timeless moment for the bullet or the second clubbing blow that would smash his brains and put him out of the way forever, he heard instead the smash of a gun somewhere behind him, and an answering shot directly above his head.

In a medley of gun echoes and shouting voices and scrambling boots that shook the floor on which he lay, the shack suddenly emptied and stillness returned. Through it he heard the sound of several horses breaking into a run and clattering away, to fade into silence.

By then he had willed enough strength into his arms to push himself up out of the dust. Blood ran warm down the side of his head, into the open collar of his shirt. A sick retching, caused by the clouted skull, went through him, passed. And as the room spun wildly and then settled he hauled his head up and looked around.

Sprawled against the edge of the door, a smoking gun beside him and his shirt sleeve drenched with blood, lay the old man from the lunchroom. The glaze of bullet shock was in his eyes, but he managed to lift his head as Hatfield came to his side.

"You're bad shot," the Ranger muttered, squinting through the throb and nausea that still held him. "I reckon you saved my hide, though."

"Reckon I did," the oldster agreed, and fumbled at his wounded arm with his good hand. He winced. "I'm leaking like a plugged canteen. How about you?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Raised a lump, broke the skin some. Nothing worse than that, I figure."

He was already ripping away the old man's bloody sleeve. It looked to be a clean wound, but it was bleeding fast. Hastily, with the torn cloth, he bound the arm tight above the hole.

"How did you happen to show up, anyhow?" he asked.

"Follered you. Seen you scoot across the street, and was just naturally curious to learn what you was up to. When I heard the shot, I figured maybe you could use some help." He winced again. "That damned Shack Turpin! I thought he'd quit the country!"

Hatfield caught him up quickly. "What about the other two?"

"I didn't get a look at anybody else—couldn't see anything much but powder-smoke!" Fervently he cursed the pain of his wounded arm. "Wish I could say I done as good to them as they done to me, but at least I drove 'em off. What the hell was this all about, anyway?"

Before Hatfield could have answered, men who had heard the shooting were converging on the shack, carrying guns and in varying stages of undress. They had approached cautiously until they had seen that the shooting appeared to be over, but now they were crowding into the shed, all asking questions at once.

"Fetch a doctor, somebody," Hatfield ordered, straightening. "Quick! This man is bleeding bad."

A man tried to stop him as he turned toward the door. Staring at the dirt and blood on the Ranger's face he demanded hoarsely:

"What about you?"

Hatfield waved him aside. "I'll be all right." But with his first step a dizzy

sickness gripped him and he had to lean against the door until it passed. After a moment, however, he was hurrying through the windy dawn toward the livery stable. The wounded oldster would be taken care of without him, and another task awaited him. He could not afford to delay. . . .

IN THE hotel, Nick Ide's office still reeked of cigarette smoke and spilled whisky after last night's game. And Nick himself was red-eyed and grouchy from having been wakened too early. But as he stood and listened to the report Shack Turpin had brought him, his reddened eyes hardened, and into his face came a dangerous expression.

"You mean," he snapped, "you left that ranger *alive?*"

Turpin's heavy, animal-like features became angry, sullen. "Nothing else we could do!" he retorted. "I told you, Buck was all set to finish him when that old man busted in, shooting. I think I killed him, but there wasn't time to make sure of either of 'em—a minute more and the whole town would of been on our ears. We heard 'em coming." He added sourly, "I thought you'd be glad to know we got that sneaking Harry Dodge."

"What good is that," Ide snapped, "with Hatfield alive? No knowing how much Dodge had already spilled when you spotted him talking outside the door of his room—what have you done with Harry?"

"Buck and Kansas are taking him out to the camp, while I came here."

Nick Ide frowned in rapid speculation, while he snapped his fingers nervously against an edge of the card-littered desk beside him. At last he nodded.

"All right. Go on to camp and hold him

for me. I'll be along as soon as I can. Harry ain't got any spine to him. I have an idea we ought to be able to make him tell us just how much he blabbed to the Ranger."

"Good idea." Turpin's lips lifted in a snarl of anticipation. "I'll work on him."

"No! You got no better sense than to kill him before we've made him talk. Leave that to me—and hold your horses until I can join you. I've got to stay and face Hatfield in case he wants to ask me some questions about Harry Dodge."

"Then maybe I better stick around?" Turpin suggested anxiously, but Ide vetoed this with an emphatic shake of head.

"I can handle him—and until I've found out how much, if anything, he knows or suspects, I certainly don't want him laying eyes on *you!*"

Turpin lifted thick shoulders. "If that's how you want it—I'll go catch up with the others."

"And don't let anybody see you leave town, for hell's sake! You take too many chances, sneaking in as often as you do."

"Lucky for you I was around this morning!" Shack Turpin retorted, but he was already headed for the door and Ide let him go.

As the door swung shut after him, the saloonman whirled and strode to the window for a look into the street. It lay empty, under a blood-tinged sky where gray clouds scudded before a whipping wind. A hanging sign creaked and swayed and dust eddied in whirlpools. An old newspaper skidded along the boardwalk, curled about the upright of a hitching post and was held there, a corner flapping.

No sign of Jim Hatfield, coming to hurl questions at him, but a cold film of sweat was on Nick Ide, and he cursed the uneasiness which would most certainly betray him, should the Ranger appear and begin needling him.

He turned back to his desk, dropped into the chair behind it, and with an impulsive thrust of both hands pushed away the litter of cards and chips that strewed it. Then, from a drawer, he brought out a sixgun, broke it to examine the loads, snapped it shut again. The click of the mechanism was a startling sound in the quiet of the room.

Ide placed the gun in a pocket of his coat, but on second thought brought it out again and laid it on the desk before him. He was fast, but he knew the legends concerning this Ranger. This lawman was the Lone Wolf.

Ide studied the gun lying before him, for minutes, then drew a folded newspaper toward him in such a way that it completely concealed the weapon. He slid a hand in under the paper, gripped the reassuring coldness of the butt plates.

He sat there, eyeing the closed door. Waiting.

BUT Jim Hatfield had decided against returning to the hotel. His first impulse had been to confront Nick Ide then and there, yet he had nothing concrete to use against him. And Harry Dodge was a prisoner in the hands of Shack Turpin's men. They had already escaped from town. So Hatfield had gone directly to the livery and piled saddle and gear on his golden stallion.

He was still suffering from that gun blow on his head and had to rest, hanging to the saddle, after he had the cinches yanked tight. He shook his head to clear it, took down the sheepskin-lined jacket he had left on a peg in Goldy's stall. He would need that today, with this abrupt change in the weather. He led the sorrel into the aisle and swung astride. Wind buffeted him like the slap of a hand as he rode out and down the ramp into the street; dust billowed and broke against Goldy's legs.

Hatfield tugged his stetson gingerly above the hurt place on his swollen scalp. He was buttoning his coat when he came abreast of the telegraph office and saw the night operator, in his green visor, standing in the lamplit door and gesturing to him excitedly.

Hatfield kneed his horse over and leaned down to accept the slip of paper

the man handed up to him.

"Just came in!"

Quickly the Ranger scanned the message, his agile mind decoding it as he read:

A LONGLOOP ARTIST ANSWERING THE DESCRIPTION YOU SENT WAS INVOLVED WITH PRAGER IN THE COLEMAN COUNTY DEAL STOP LOOKS LIKE YOU ARE ON RIGHT TRACK STOP PRAGER IS DESCRIBED AS A GAMBLER AND A RECKLESS PLUNGER STOP THAT KIND IS GENERALLY DANGEROUS SO WATCH YOURSELF.

MCDOWELL

So here was his tie-in—the link between Shack Turpin and Duff Prager, which in some way as yet unclear pulled all the parts of this puzzle together; the Broad A and the Horseshoe, and Harry Dodge, and all the rest.

Hatfield nodded with satisfaction as he folded the paper and shoved it in a pocket. Much remained to be answered, but a part of the riddle he had guessed, and to a part this message gave further invaluable clues.

But a gambler, and a reckless plunger! Such a man as that would not let himself be taken when he saw the cards running against him. That was a real problem. If Duff Prager should take alarm, he could slip clear out of the country while Hatfield was attempting to rescue Harry Dodge. He had to take some step to insure against that!

And so, although he could hardly afford the delay, he turned back, a new decision made. He left Goldy on trailing reins at the foot of the outside steps leading to Laird Cameron's rooms above the bank, climbed them and laid his fist against the closed door.

His arm was raised for a second impatient pounding when the door was suddenly jerked open. Laird Cameron, barefooted and tousle-headed, wearing only a pair of pants he had hastily donned, blinked a moment before Hatfield's bloody condition jarred him wide awake.

"Jim!" he exclaimed in horror. "What the devil—"

"It's nothing," the Ranger told him shortly. "A tear in the scalp. It's already stopped bleeding. Look here, I haven't got much time. I have to be riding."

"Like this? You're not strong enough!" Cameron stepped back, throwing the door wide. "Come in a minute. At least let me make you some coffee or something!"

Hatfield started to refuse, then the emptiness of his stomach and his spent strength combined to change his mind for him. Even climbing the steps to this door had told on him.

"All right," he said. "I could use a slug of coffee. But I've got to do my talking while you fix it, because a man's life is depending on me."

Resting on Cameron's still-warm cot in the lawyer's living quarters adjoining the office, while Cameron worked quickly to build a fire in his cook stove and put on coffee, the Ranger told him the whole thing, from the beginning. He told of the search for the elusive criminal who had killed a Ranger, and of the unsigned letter that had brought him, Hatfield, here to this cowtown. He told what had happened minutes before in the shed at the edge of town.

"Well, there it is," he finished. "You wanted to know, yesterday, if there was anything you could do. Now I've got a job for you."

CAMERON filled a china mug with hot coffee from the pot, and handed it over. The Ranger shook his head at the query about sugar and cream. He wanted coffee black and strong, to fill his belly and take the weakness out of him. The lawyer poured a mugful for himself, and as they sipped the steaming liquid, Cameron said:

"I'm your man. What do you want done?"

"Everything points to Nick Ide," Hatfield told him. "Harry Dodge hates him and wouldn't be above informing on his boss if he had found out, some way, that Ide was this embezzler and killer, Prager. Ide came here about the time Prager dropped from sight, a half-dozen years ago. He brought a lot of money with him and opened his gambling joint, and no

knowing what kind of business he actually carries on behind that front. He certainly wasn't happy to see a Ranger show up, and he put me in a room where Shack Turpin was able to get a very good shot at me.

"Anyway, it all adds. How it ties in with the trouble between Gant and Allenbow, I can't figure yet—but there's a link all right, through Shack Turpin. If we can get Ide—or Prager, if that's who he is—maybe we can somehow at the same time end this fence war. That should give you more than enough of an incentive to help."

"Name it."

Hatfield had finished his coffee, and he set the mug aside. He studied Cameron for a moment.

"Watch Nick Ide for me," he said. "I can't, myself, because I have to get on the trail of the men who abducted Dodge. Maybe it's already too late to save him, but I have to try. But while I'm making that try, I'm out of luck if Ide should get wind of the fact that he's in danger and make a run for it."

"I see." Laird Cameron stepped to the cot, took a six-shooter from beneath the pillow, and shoved it under his waistband. "All right, Jim!" he said quietly. "You can count on me!"

"Fine! I thought I could." Getting to his feet Hatfield felt stronger already, with the warmth of the black coffee spreading through him. "Now maybe I could have some warm water to wash this blood off me, and hit the trail. It looks like nasty weather for that, too."

In Cameron's shaving mirror, he saw the crop of beard stubble that clouded his jaws, but there was no time to think of shaving. He cleaned the scalp tear carefully, accepting the court plaster Cameron offered him to put over it.

Shrugging into the sheep-lined coat, he hurried out and down the steps to his waiting horse. A few stray streaks of snow were already blowing white along the windy street. The sun was no longer visible and the air had an uninviting bite and sharpness to it.

CHAPTER VIII

White Fury

AT THE Broad A, Ed Romaine saw the storm build as he hunched into his heavy coat, his pony's tail streaming in the wind, the dry grasses of the hilltop where he sat his saddle flattened and combed by its iron teeth. He looked at the blowing scud that looked as though it were pressed down over the limitless flatness of this Panhandle graze, and saw the first scattered streaks of snow quickly thicken and draw his range of vision in behind a growing curtain of white.

His bitter mouth hardened. The worst about this terrible land of open distances were the winters—with no natural shelter, nothing to break the wild sweep of the wind. He thought again of his beloved southern range. The brasada, with its million talons of catclaw and *huisache* was cruel enough, but to him it was home. And this country had never seemed more alien than now as winter clamped its iron grip upon the Plains.

Then he thrust from him these thoughts which only concerned him personally, awake to the fact that what was beginning now held the seeds of real disaster. He kicked his pony ahead, down off the rise and into the smother of the growing storm.

As he entered the ravine beyond, he heard the thud of hooves on stone and a steer went by him, its red-brown hide already whitening as the pellets of wind-driven snow lodged there. Head down, tail blowing, the steer plodded blindly past him, trying vainly to outwalk the cold force that pressed upon it from the north. Romaine let it go by, and rode on.

Directions were already becoming a matter of orienting himself with the blast of the wind. The earth turned gray, then white as the snow began to find lodging. Romaine's horse plodded through the knifing streaks and presently, toward his left, he heard a man's angry, shouted cursing.

He reined over in that direction and came upon one of his riders who, with coiled rope and exasperated cursing, was trying in vain to drive a jag of a half-dozen head of beef. The rider was slapping his rope into their broad faces, but could get the critters headed east for only a few steps before they halted and doggedly turned their tails to the wind, waiting patiently for the man to let them go the way they wanted to.

The rider turned a snow-wet face as Romaine rode up out of the murk. The foreman said curtly, "Let 'em alone. You can't turn 'em. They're going to drift, no matter what you do to stop 'em."

"But that damned fence—"

"Come on," Romaine ordered, cutting him off. "We're heading for the ranch."

From every compass point, Broad A riders were converging on ranch headquarters. That had been the orders, given long ago against the day when this might happen. Every man hit for home, and we'll tell you then what happens!

The crew was congregated around the big barn when Romaine rode in. He tossed his reins to a cowboy and swung down, pausing long enough to say, "Every man that needs a fresh mount, get saddled. Check your guns, too, and your ammunition."

There weren't any questions. As they fell to work Romaine swung about and went across the open yard to the house. The cottonwood brakes were serving little purpose today; the wind swept through them like the slashing of a knife.

Romaine, leaning against the wind, tramped through deepening snow scum and mounted the steps to the veranda. He kicked the snow off his boots before he stepped inside.

Nels Allenbow was seated beside a blazing fire that roared up the stone chimney. Allenbow's clawlike fingers were gripping the arms of his wheel-chair and he was leaning forward as his foreman entered, his fierce old eyes probing and demanding to hear the worst.

"It's hell to pay," Romaine told him. "Snow's already piled up a half-foot deep in the hollows. With that wind, every head of stock we own will be heading for the fence."

"Get the men together!" snapped Allenbow. "That wire is coming down! And there's nothing Oral Gant, or the devil himself, can do to stop us!"

"Crew already has orders. Got the men saddling fresh horses now."

"Fetch up one for me."

Romaine's head jerked as though he had been struck. He stammered something.

"Don't stand there like a fool!" the old man roared. "You think I aim to sit here at a time like this? I can still ride, I reckon, if I have to be lifted into the saddle and tied to hold me on! You hear?" His voice rose in fury. "By hell, I'll show Gant it ain't no helpless cripple he's trying to ruin! You do as you're told. . . ."

BEFORE leaving town Hatfield had discovered that the tracks of the horses ridden by the escaping killers were plain enough, pointing directly west from a clump of trees where the animals had been tied behind the shed. Even on the half-frozen ground after he himself had ridden out of town the Ranger was able to pick out sign.

Three horses, and it didn't look as if any had been ridden double. This perplexed and bothered him a little, for there had been two others in the shed with Turpin and Harry Dodge, and that should have meant a fourth rider. Maybe one had dropped out. Yes, he decided, that must be it—a messenger to carry news to Nick Ide, no doubt.

He kept on, following the tracks which led straight on to Broad A range. But he was not fooled by this. He had already decided that the rustlers must have a camp somewhere in the Canadian brakes, and it was there they would be taking their prisoner, not to any Broad A line shack.

The thermometer was down, but it was the knifing edge of the wind that made him settle deeper into the collar of his sheepskin. Its cold fingers found the

wound in his swollen scalp. And faster and thicker the snow streaked by him, out of the north, and began to pile up underfoot. Desperately he pushed Goldy ahead, determined to hold this trail. But little by little the white crystals effaced it. And at last he had to pull up, knowing that the weather had licked him.

It was the storm the old lunchroom man had promised, reading its coming in some obscure sign that ordinary senses could not detect. It might end as quickly as it had begun; or it might continue until drifts the height of a man were built up in all the protected hollows. In either event, any attempt to reach Harry Dodge and save him before his captors could murder him seemed already a failure.

The Ranger realized that it would be senseless to go on riding blind. In these Plains storms it was appallingly easy for a man to lose his bearings, especially in unfamiliar country. He could wander to his death. There was only one sure landmark that he could trust himself to locate in this smother—the Broad A headquarters. He turned Goldy toward it.

The buildings looked ghostly through the screen of blowing snow. It was so dark now that Hatfield expected to see lamplight winking in the windows of house and bunkshack, but the whole layout had a ghostly, deserted look. He rode directly to the barn, leaning from saddle to unhook the big door with fingers that were numb within his heavy gloves.

Inside the barn, away from the force of the wind, it seemed deceptively warm. As Goldy stamped in loose straw Hatfield swung down and whipped loose snow from his clothing with the edges of his palms.

Then he saw Virginia Burke. In jeans and boots and a cumbersome, threadbare coat, she stood beside a spotted pony with a latigo in her hand, watching him. Hatfield touched finger to the brim of his snow-wet stetson, and walked over to her. He saw tears on her face.

He exclaimed, "Why, what's the matter?" And, indicating the saddled horse, "You surely weren't thinking of trying to ride in this weather?"

She turned away, gave the latigo a yank and made the knot. "I've got to!" she said. "Mr. Allenbow—"

"Is he ill?"

"Worse than that!" She faced him again, and her lips were trembling. "He's gone out—in this!" Her helpless gesture indicated the fury of the storm outside. "Ed Romaine and the crew left not ten minutes ago, and Mr. Allenbow made them take him with them. He shouldn't, Mr. Hatfield! He has no business trying to do such a thing. But I—I couldn't stop him!"

She was crying again. It astonished Hatfield a little that she, or anyone else, could show so much genuine concern for one who had mistreated her as badly as old Nels Allenbow had this girl. It might make the old misanthrope feel guilty, he thought, if he could see her now.

What he said was, "Where have they gone?" And knew the answer before she gave it.

"To tear out Gant's fence. It'll mean shooting!"

HE WAS already whirling back to his own horse, testing Goldy's cinches. But when he swung again into the snow-wet saddle, Virginia was already on her pony and waiting for him.

"You aren't going!" he told her flatly.

"I am! I failed Mr. Allenbow by not stopping him somehow. If anything should happen to him I've got to be on hand to take care of him!"

Hatfield saw there was no use arguing. Saying no more, he opened the door of the barn and rode through after her fastening the door behind them.

The wind had increased its ferocity in just these few minutes, and it struck them with a buffeting that seemed enough to lift a man from his saddle. Hatfield ducked his head to it, one hand leaping to clamp the sodden stetson in place. The girl swayed as the wind caught at her clothing. Her horse began to pitch and fight the reins.

Hatfield kneed Goldy near enough for him to reach out and grab the pony's cheek piece and force the mount down.

Then they had their back to the wind and the animal settled down to drift ahead of it.

Hatfield tried to hurry the horses, anxious about what might be transpiring in the storm ahead of them. Goldy responded, but the spotted pony was less sure-footed and threatened to flounder in the slick snow. Fearful for the girl, the Ranger forced himself to hold back to a pace to which the pony could accommodate itself.

They rode stirrup to stirrup except when the wind pulled them apart. It was like past them. The snow clinging to their hides gave them the appearance of wraiths, and the ground cover muffled their hoofs. They moved without sound; heads down, backs humped. But after this one glimpse the stifle of swirling flakes swept down again and the cattle were lost from sight.

A threshing in a clump of brush drew Hatfield aside, and he found a down steer struggling in the loose scurf of drifted snow. He leaned over and tailed it up with a hard jerk that dragged a muffled bawl from the beast but helped it lurch to

A TALL TEXAS TALE

A LO-O-O-O-NG TIME

SOME years ago an old Texas cowpoke decided that life on the range was getting too rugged for him, so he moved to the city and got a job as a guide in a museum.

One day, while showing a group of visitors through the room containing the bones of extinct mammals and reptiles, an old lady pointed to the reconstructed carcass of a dinosaur and said, "Can you tell me how old those bones are, my good man?"

"A million and one and a half years old," the guide promptly answered.

"That's a pretty sharp estimate, isn't it?" remarked the old lady. "How can you be so definite?"

"Well," drawled the former cowboy, "It's this way, ma'am. When I started to work here I heard one of them professors say that specimen was a million years old. That was one and a half years ago."

—Al Spong

not safe, in this murk, to drift out of sight. The wind whistled its ferocious song and flung the snow, like hard shot, against their backs and sometimes in side eddies full into their averted faces.

And soon, as they moved before the wind, they realized they were not the only creatures drifting onward in the swirl and smother of the storm. For they were overtaking dark, slow-moving shapes that would be Broad A cattle, driven ahead of the storm with a slow, insistent pressure.

Once the wind lifted suddenly and in a muffled pocket of stillness the air cleared, miraculously. They caught a glimpse of a dozen or more of the beasts slipping ghost-its feet. It slammed blindly into Goldy's flank, and horse and man nearly went down on top of it. But Hatfield pulled his sorrel out of it, and the steer went lumbering away.

After what seemed hours of this, but was actually much less, Virginia Burke suddenly pulled closer.

She exclaimed, "Do you hear?"

He nodded. It was plain now above the howl of the wind—a deeper, eerier sound. The mournful lowing of cattle that could only mean one thing. Jim Hatfield listened tensely for other sounds—maybe the lash of gunfire.

This didn't come, but as dark shapes

became visible through the gloom ahead he heard a shout, riding thinly on the wind. It was old Nels Allenbow's furious bellow:

"Gant, for the last time I'm telling you and your men to stand away! We're tearing this wire out while there's time to save my beef herd!"

And, answering him, Oral Gant's taunting reply:

"Try it if you want. First man that makes a move towards that fence gets a bullet through his craw!"

CHAPTER IX

Toward Showdown

JIM HATFIELD laid a hand on Virginia Bruce's arm to halt her outcry. They could see the picture now. Before them, stretching right and left beyond eye's reach, was the fence, and as far as they could see cattle stood against it—patient, heads lowered, the treacherous bars of steel in front of them. Most were silent, but a pitiful moaning rose from many bovine throats, as more animals drifted up to join the stand.

They were two deep, three deep, in many places already. They would continue to pile up like this. And unless the storm abated and the wind died nothing could save them, except removal of the barrier that kept them from moving ahead.

Nels Allenbow and Ed Romaine and a half-dozen other Broad A riders had pushed their mounts through to the wire and sat facing another line of men across the fence. Oral Gant and his Horseshoe crew had the Broad A outnumbered, and there was a grim expectancy in his men—waiting, with the snow swirling around them, for an attempt to break the fence.

"Well?" Gant snapped testily.

Next to him, big Mike Maugher shifted in his saddle. Maugher looked unhappy and he was eyeing, not the riders across the line, but the pile-up of bawling, suffering cattle. Hatfield believed he could read the man's thoughts. Maugher was, first and last, a stockman. He could read the sure fate of these trapped animals, and he didn't like it.

He turned and muttered something to his boss—a protest, Jim Hatfield thought. Oral Gant straightened with an angry look and said, loudly enough to reach the ears of the men on the near side of the fence:

"You got your orders!"

Turning, he hurled defiance at the Broad A crew as he drew his sixgun from holster:

"We're waiting on you! Why don't you come ahead?"

Old Allenbow, who probably was suffering the tortures of the damned from that broken hip, shouted hoarsely, "It's a bluff!"

"You think so?" retorted Gant, and as Ed Romaine, spurred by the taunting, suddenly kneed his mount forward with a pair of wire cutters in his hand, Gant tipped his gun muzzle.

A lance of fire spurted through the snow-swirl. The bullet skimmed close enough to Romaine's head to make the brasada man duck and pull taut rein.

"This bluff has lead teeth, Allenbow!" called Gant, through the echoes of the shot.

Then Hatfield was reining forward, through the straggle of snow-crusted cattle, toward the wire. "Listen to me!" he shouted, and suddenly all attention was on him. "This feuding has gone far enough. You've got to stop it—now!—before it leads you to real disaster!"

"Stay out of this, Ranger!" bawled Gant. "That cross-grained old devil is just reaping what he sowed! He's called me a liar once too often! He's stolen my beef, and now he wants to throw his own stinking cattle onto my land and take it away from me!"

Old Allenbow stiffened, and raised a scrawny fist. "Why, damn you—"

"Wait a minute!" Hatfield cut in on their bickering. "Both of you are talking loco! I think I can prove to Allenbow that he's wrong, and that someone actually has been

working on Horseshoe herds. I think I can show exactly who's been doing it—and why. But while we're arguing, these cattle will die if they're not allowed to get through. Gant, it's you I'm appealing to now!"

But the man was plainly beyond argument. "No! I ain't backing down for anybody! I've said before, and I stick to it—first man to lay a finger on any strand of this wire—"

"All right," cried a voice. "If that's the way you want it!"

Hatfield jerked about, unbelieving, as someone came running past him. It was Virginia Burke, her face pale but set with determination. Before anyone could guess what she was up to she had reached and snatched the heavy wire cutters from Ed Romaine's hand, then was pushing and fighting her way past the stranded cattle, up to the fence.

Hatfield called out something to her and tried to follow, but a steer shifted into his path and held him up. He heard Gant's roar of anger, and then the sharp *ping* as taut wire snapped under the blades of the cutter.

HORSESHOE riders lifted their guns, but if they would have shot Allenbow's men from the saddle not one of them would open fire on a woman. Virginia must have known this. With one strand broken she went calmly to work on a second, and then a third. No one else seemed capable of moving.

And then, without warning, big Mike Maugher was kicking his bronc forward, snow spurting under its hoofs. Before anyone could guess what he meant to do he was at the girl's side and, saying, "Give me those!" he picked the tool from her hand. Deliberately he began to cut the wire.

"Mike!" The roar was stung from Oral Gant.

His foreman turned and said across his shoulder, "Go to hell! If you're too stubborn to listen to reason, then I'm through taking orders from you! We can't stand and watch good beef die in its tracks—Joe! Pecos!" He was yelling at men in the Horseshoe crew. "Give me a hand!"

They rode forward. Then, with yells of triumph, all of Allenbow's riders fell upon the wire.

They made short work of it. Those who had come unequipped with wire cutters had saddle ropes, and with these they snared the deep-set poles and hauled them up, snow and mud gouting as their horses dug for footing. The broken ends of wire had to be carefully coiled to prevent the stock from tangling and crippling themselves.

But with a strangely silent intensity the men of both outfits threw themselves at the job. Panel by panel the fence went down. Broad A beef drifted through the gap onto Horseshoe range, and drifted on before the hand of the wind.

And Hatfield, watching Oral Gant, saw the weight of defeat settle on the man. He saw the rancher's gun lift in a hand that trembled with rage, then fall again to his side, unfired, as Gant knew he was beaten. He watched the scene with his head sunk into the collar of his blanket coat, and suddenly jerked rein, wheeled his horse, and rode off alone through the falling snow, his back turned on the destruction of his fence.

The toiling men had already moved on along the line. Seeing Mike Maugher sitting his horse and coiling a soggy, soaked hair rope, the Ranger rode over to him.

"What about your boss?" he asked.

Maugher looked about, only now aware that the Horseshoe owner had ridden away. "Yeah," he repeated in a troubled tone, "what about him? I doubt he's my boss any longer. Hell, you can't blame him. I the same as stabbed him in the back!"

"It had to be done," Hatfield reminded him. "If Gant wouldn't be reasonable, then there was nothing to do but take matters out of his hands. Don't blame yourself too much."

A couple of riders had come up in time to hear this. They were old Allenbow and Virginia Burke.

The girl said, "He's right, Mr. Maugher.

And I want to thank you."

The big cowman looked at her and at once his expression took on the old sullenness Hatfield had seen there before. He shrugged and spoke gruffly, with an effort, his shadowed glance dropping to the big hands that held the reins.

"Yeah. You done a right nervy thing yourself, Miss Burke. Gant was that worked up, he might have used a gun even on you. And I might not have been able to stop him."

Nels Allenbow cleared his throat. "Of course, Maugher," he said grudgingly, "you understand that if you've lost your job over this affair, why—"

That was when the lash of a rifle shot came out of the murk. The high-powered bullet scorched straight into that clot of horses and riders and broke it apart in startling suddenness. Virginia Burke's nervous pony squealed and went right up on its rear legs, forefeet pawing air. The girl's scream was choked off in her throat as she pitched from the saddle to the ground.

These impressions registered confusedly while Jim Hatfield was grabbing for a sixgun and hauling Goldy sharply around, seeking the source of the shot. In the storm the shot, unrepeated, was all but impossible to trace. But hunting through the screen of sifting snow for sight of the gunman, the Lone Wolf was vaguely aware of big Mike Maugher throwing himself out of saddle to the side of the fallen girl, murmuring in a choked and strangely gentle voice, "Virginia! Oh, darling!"

HATFIELD thought he heard her gasping that she was not hurt, but then a shift of wind broke the snow curtain for an instant and gave him the barest glimpse of a mounted figure, motionless as a statue, perhaps a dozen yards away.

He grunted sharply, "Goldy! Trail!" And the sorrel stallion leaped forward under him.

The curtain swirled back; the figure was gone. Knowing he faced a rifle, the Ranger nevertheless drove recklessly ahead, six-shooter ready for a target. But the sniper did not wait for him. Goldy covered the intervening distances in a few powerful leaps, but there was no trace of that other rider.

Pushing on, leaning forward in saddle as he peered through snow-encrusted lashes, Hatfield swung his glance in a wide arc but there was nothing to be seen except the wind-rattled brush and the blowing snow.

Off to his left a hoof struck an iron ringing from barren rock. Whirling that way, he discerned a low, dark outline. He spurred toward it, still without caution, and made it out to be a clump of trees in a shallow swale. He rode down to them, Goldy keeping his footing surely on the slick slope.

The Ranger broke straight into the trees, dipping his head to avoid a low branch that tried to sweep him from saddle. But then he had to pull up, for within the trees there was nothing. He sat for a moment listening, but heard nothing but the hiss of the falling flakes and the sweep of wind through the stripped branches. The rifleman had gone straight through, and there plainly was no chance of overtaking him.

So he rode back to see what damage that rifle bullet might have done. He found Mike Maugher and Virginia Burke kneeling in the snow beside the motionless figure of Nels Allenbow. And he knew then who had been the real target for that treacherous rifle bullet.

They had the old man's coat open, and Virginia was working at the red-soaked shirt with a nurse's sure, competent fingers.

"Dead?" Hatfield whispered grimly, as he swung down.

She looked up at him with a shake of head. "No. But it went through his chest. Might have got the lung."

Another rider came out of the storm; Ed Romaine. He looked at the unconscious figure of his boss, then lifted his smoldering glance to the Ranger's face.

"Well, Hatfield," said the brasada man, "I guess this is plain enough. You going to make the arrest, or do I take the crew

and bring him in?"

"Who?"

"Why, Gant, of course. Who else could have done this?"

Hatfield shook his head. "It's not that clear-cut." He added quickly, as Romaine started to stiffen for an angry outburst, "But don't worry. The law will do its job. I'll get the man who shot Allenbow. Just now, the thing for you to think about is getting him home as fast as you damn well can!"

"And we need a doctor," Virginia Burke put in. "There may be internal bleeding."

Mike Maugher was getting to his feet, turning to slap the snow from his saddle and hunt for stirrup.

"I'll head for town, pronto," he said gruffly. "I'll have the medico at the Broad A if he has to kill a bronc getting there!" Then he was gone without waiting for Virginia's stammered thanks.

Hatfield got one of Allenbow's limp arms around his neck, and Romaine dropped from saddle to take the other one. The old man weighed next to nothing. Together they got him onto his horse, and Hatfield held him sagging there until Romaine and Virginia mounted. He stood back then and let them move in on either side of the old man's horse, where they could support him between them on the slow, painful ride back to ranch headquarters.

He watched until they were out of sight. Then satisfied that Romaine and Virginia could handle that job, he turned and caught up Goldy's reins, slapped the sorrel on a damp, cold shoulder as he toed into the stirrup and lifted his lean shape again into saddle.

The snow was thinning, for he realized that his radius of vision was lengthening with the passing moments. A gust of wind blew up a curtain of the crystal flakes to hang sparkling in a cloud before him, then it settled again as the gust fell away.

The storm that had come with such sudden ferocity seemed indeed to be lessening to a dgree that made riding possible again. Hatfield nodded in grim satisfaction, and picked up the reins.

"Let's go, boy!" he told the sorrel stallion. "The big job is ahead of us—the showdown!"

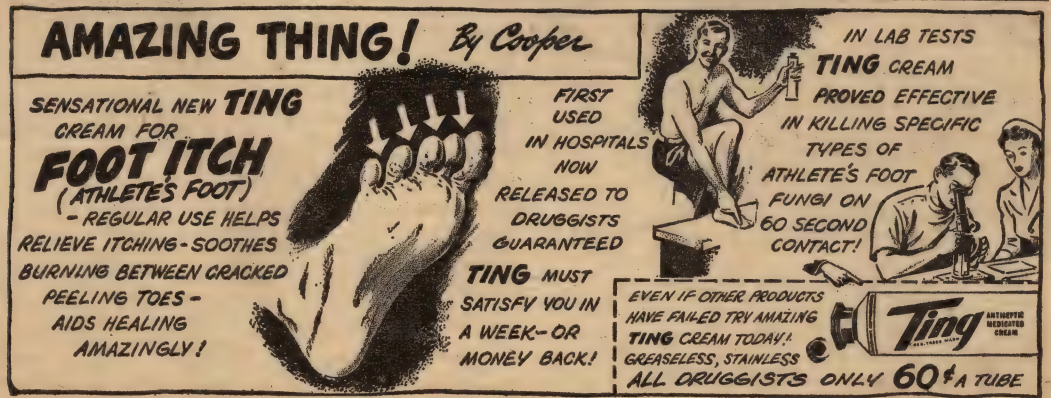
CHAPTER X

Storm's End

WIND-DRIFTED snow had covered all tracks, but the air had cleared enough to make travel safe again. Hatfield pushed Goldy to as hard a gait as he dared. The stallion had already given hard service, bucking the wind and the slick footing, but Hatfield had to call on him for greater effort, because a man's life rode with them.

He traveled blind but he had a guess now as to where he would find the men he sought. Wherever the camp might

[*Turn page*]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have been hidden in the Canadian brakes, the sudden fierceness of the storm would certainly have driven them to cover, and there was likely only one handy shelter in which they could have holed up.

So he rode with considerable confidence. And when at last he neared the brush-choked coulee he wanted, he dismounted and put Goldy into a clump of jack-willows. Pulling off his gloves, he drew his right-hand gun and moved ahead cautiously, on foot.

Climbing, he parted wet, black brush, careful not to dislodge the snow that clung to it and looked down upon the Broad A line cabin, nodding in satisfaction. A blue line of smoke looped and penciled upward in the sheltered stillness of the coulee. In the corral were horses, five of them.

Quickly he studied out his best line of approach. Then, crawling back out of the rim brush, he got to his feet and moved toward the funnel of a dry creek bed that led down into the ravine. He went down through this, ducking low for cover and careful not to dislodge stones that could tumble ahead of him and set up a warning racket. Once he hauled up, listening, thinking he had heard a long-drawn, moaning cry of pain. There was something blood-chilling about the sound, especially since he thought he knew what it signified.

Then he was running lightly toward a blind side of the cabin. He brought up against the damp wall, waited a moment until satisfied that he hadn't been detected. Through the thin boards came a hum of voices, indistinguishable, but lifting now and then in seeming anger.

The door was on the opposite side of the cabin, and the Lone Wolf slid along the wall, cursing the snow that squealed beneath his boots. At the corner he halted in surprise and the gun leaped level in his hand as unexpectedly he came face to face with a man.

The fellow was standing by the door, head down, apparently listening to what was going on within. Hatfield could not see his hatbrim-shadowed face, or recognize him in the bulky mackinaw he wore. The Ranger's hand tightened on his gun and he grunted, in a voice that would carry no farther than the other man's ears:

"Don't make a sound!"

The fellow's head jerked up, startled. The man was Laird Cameron.

"Jim!" he whispered. "Thank God you've come. Nick Ide's in there. He rode out of town, as you said he would, and I managed to follow him. He and Shack Turpin and another man have got Harry Dodge and they're trying to make him talk, to say—"

On the tail of his words came another cry from beyond the closed door, a trembling scream of pain. Hatfield winced as it knifed through him.

"Let's go in!" he muttered grimly.

In one stride he reached the door, and a thrust of his boot sent it banging open. Laird Cameron followed him as he lunged in across the sill.

The little cabin seemed crowded with men. Hatfield tallied them all with a sweeping glance, as his second gun leaped in his fist.

He ordered crisply, "Don't anybody move!"

Harry Dodge sat in a chair beside the table, tied there, his thin face gray with pain, and sweat-covered. His torn-open shirt, exposing a narrow chest, showed ugly burns and explained the faint, sickening scent of roasted flesh that hung over the room.

Nick Ide stood over the prisoner, glowing cigar end poised for further torture. He turned, staring at Hatfield as though frozen. Harry Dodge's frantic stare shifted from the cigar's burning eye of red to the men in the doorway, hope mingling with the pain that had him slobbering blood from a gnawed tongue.

THE rest of the men in that room also seemed incapable of movement in that first startled moment. One had opened the door of the little stove and was leaning for a billet of wood to shove inside. On the edge of a bunk across the room, Shack Turpin sat and stared at Hat-

field with his ugly bestial features comically empty of expression.

But the man who stood by the window, with the point of a shoulder leaning against the frame, was holding a sixgun, checking its loads, and perhaps the feel of the gun gave him more presence of mind than the rest. At any rate, he was first to overcome the grip of surprise. With a slap of his hand he rocked the cylinder into place and, tilting up the muzzle of the weapon, sent a thundering lance of flame in the Ranger's direction.

Hatfield was expecting it. With odds of four to two he couldn't expect to settle this thing without gunplay. As the man touched trigger the Ranger got off a shot with his left-hand gun almost in unison.

The outlaw had been too hasty. The bullet meant for Hatfield dug into the plank floor at the Ranger's feet, then the man who had fired it was spinning to the impact of lead, striking the wall with his face, crumpling.

But the double shots had jarred the rest into action, and then Hatfield had his hands full.

Laird Cameron, at his elbow, was working a gun; another was answering from over by the bunk. But Nick Ide's gunspeed was the real, astonishing threat. Scarcely had the cigar dropped from his fingers than a Colt was in his hand and flaming. Hatfield felt the fierce tug and burn as a bullet sliced through the padding of his coat sleeve. Methodically he triggered back.

But his aim had been ruined by the singing of a bullet within inches of his ear. The man by the stove had dropped to one knee behind it and was shooting from there. Hatfield threw a shot that whanged off cast iron and screamed off in ricochet. At the same instant he was stepping sideward, throwing his right foot back and presenting a narrower target to meet the blast of a second shot from Ide's gun.

The heat of it reached him across the short distance that separated them, and the searing muzzle flash was blinding. But he shot across his body, targeting the smeared image. He heard the impact of the slug hitting home, even as he spun and took a long stride toward the man behind the stove.

That outlaw must have expected almost anything else but this, and he stumbled to his feet, scrambling backward. His finger cramped the trigger and dust sifted down as his bullet drilled the rotting ceiling shakes. Then he was going down, with the weapon falling from his fingers, as Hatfield's gun roared again.

Smoke curling from the muzzles of his weapons, the Ranger straightened and turned, his eyes searching through the room that stank with burnt powder and rang with the echoes of trapped gunfire. Over by the bunk, Shack Turpin lay on the floor with both hands clutching his belly, a look of surprise on his animal face, one that faded to blankness as he stiffened and life left him.

Laird Cameron, breathing heavily, stared at the work his six-shooter had done. Then, as it seemed to break through that the furious moment was over and the fight won, he turned his head and looked at Jim Hatfield. Their eyes met for a silent instant. Then the gun in Cameron's hand began to swing toward the Ranger.

But Hatfield already had a gun muzzle tipped toward him and the Lone Wolf ordered sharply:

"Drop it—*Prager!*"

The lawyer's whole body seemed to stiffen at the impact of that name. His head jerked up, his nostrils flaring.

"Drop it!"

Slowly, Cameron's fingers opened and let the gun thud to the floor. But he shook his head a little, as though not understanding.

"You didn't think I knew, did you?" the Ranger said in grim satisfaction. "That's just why I came to you this morning and asked you to watch Nick Ide for me. I wanted to lay any thought you might have had that I'd begun to suspect you!"

CAMERON'S face had utterly drained of color. "I—you must be out of your head, Ranger!"

"No, he isn't!" cried a voice, Harry

Dodge's voice. Still tied in his chair, with the torture marks of Nick Ide's cigar burned into his hide, he said, "You got it right, Hatfield! He's Duff Prager. I once heard him tell Nick Ide that, from his own mouth!"

The color flooded into the lawyer's face. Then, eyes blazing, an ugly look distorting his mouth, he whirled on the bound man.

"I always did figure you for an eavesdropping sneak! Wasn't anything went on in that hotel you didn't know about, was there?"

Harry shrugged. "Man's got to look out for himself."

Hatfield asked sharply, "Who wrote the letter to Headquarters, Harry? You?"

"No. Nick wrote it to scare Prager with when he threatened to get out of line. Prager owed Nick a lot of money in gambling debts and was trying to renege."

"Those damned crooked games of his—" snarled Prager.

The Ranger nodded slowly. "It's all beginning to fit. About the only thing I ever knew for sure about Duff Prager was that he liked to gamble, that he'd take almost any kind of reckless plunge. So that ruled out a cool, shrewd operator like Nick Ide, because Nick was just like his handwriting in the letter—careful and sure of every stroke. But you, Prager—I heard you cuss out Nick Ide to his face, yesterday morning, about his crooked cards. I might have thought it was just banter, but you sounded like a man who had been burnt and was sore as hell about it. Nick had got into you, had he?"

"Plenty!" Harry Dodge put in, with a sneering laugh. "Prager lost most of the money he stole in Coleman County before he even showed up here and started his law office. But he couldn't keep away from the green-topped tables at Nick's. He got took for more than he could ever have paid off."

"Is that when he brought in Shack Turpin?"

"Yeah, and talked Allenbow into hiring him. But even the money from the beef Turpin stole wasn't enough to satisfy Nick. And when Turpin lost his job and sold out his old pal by telling Nick who Cameron really was, Nick had him sewed up for good."

Hatfield threw a cold look at the scowling Prager. "I'm surprised you didn't kill him," he observed drily. "The way you killed Bert McKibben."

"Don't you think I would have?" snarled Prager. "He was too damn fast for me. You saw what he could do with a gun!"

The Ranger looked down at the crumpled shape at his feet, and remembered the incredible smoothness of the saloonman's draw.

"Yes—and you couldn't run out again, as you had at Coleman County, because you had the biggest gamble of all at stake—Virginia Burke, and the Broad A! She still doesn't know, does she, that old Allenbow, without kin or heirs of any sort, has willed the ranch to her? That's what he meant, of course, when he said if she'd put up with his cussedness she wouldn't be sorry. You'd drawn the will, so you knew if you married the girl you'd some day have the ranch—and if you could promote a fence war with the Horseshoe you'd get Allenbow killed."

"That was Nick's doings," grunted Prager, "not mine. He made me promise him half. He kept Shack Turpin working on Gant's herds, trying to bring things to a head."

"But you shot Allenbow out of the saddle, thinking the blame would be pinned on Gant! Then you came on to this line camp, figuring the storm would drive Nick and his men here for cover. You'd murder them all, and clear your trail for good!" Hatfield liked the way the pieces now were sliding together. "Only thing I don't understand is what it was possessed Nick Ide to send that letter to Ranger Headquarters!"

Harry Dodge said, "He didn't mean for it to be mailed. Like I told you, he just meant to give Prager a scare. But something went wrong—"

"You!" exclaimed Hatfield. "*You* sent it? To get back at Nick for knocking you around?"

"Ruined everything, damn you!" Prager began to swear, cursing the bound man with fury.

"All right," snapped the Lone Wolf. "Just stand over there, Prager. Keep your hands high and don't try to make a break while I cut Harry loose and see if anything needs to be done for those burns on his chest."

PRAGER obeyed sullenly. Hatfield stepped around Dodge's chair and stooped to the knots that bound the man. They were stubborn. He had holstered one gun and had to lay the other on the table while he tried to loosen the knots.

He heard Harry's sudden cry of warning. "Look out!"

That Prager might have a hideout gun in his clothes had somehow not occurred to him. He head jerked up just as the weapon was appearing out of the gap of the lawyer's coat, its black muzzle swiveling toward him. His fingers swept up the Colt he'd laid aside.

Prager's gun boomed. The bullet screamed along the table-top, gouging a shallow groove. The clean sliver of pine leaped and stung blood from the Lone Wolf's cheek. Then smoke filmed from the muzzle of Hatfield's gun, and when it cleared there was nothing in front of his sights.

He came up from his crouch, walked around the table, and stood looking down at the lifeless body.

He said slowly, "You've killed your last Ranger. . . ."

On the day Hatfield was to leave Arbuckle to return to Austin, his job finished, he rode out to the Broad A to say good-by. After the storm the sky had cleared to a blue that looked as though it had been rubbed to a dazzle by the clouds and wind that had recently scoured it. The air held the clean bite of winter; the sun was high and yellow, the ground white. Cattle held to the protected creek bottoms, feeding on graze that thrust above the snow.

At the ranch house he found Virginia Burke and big Mike Maugher before the friendly blaze of the living room fireplace, and both greeted him with pleasure. The girl looked happy, for the first time since Hatfield had first seen her. And an astounding change had come over black-haired Mike. His surliness, the chip that had ridden his competent, burly shoulder, seemed gone for good. Hatfield knew how it had been with him—loving Virginia Burke, and seeing her apparently spoken for by the lawyer, Cameron, whom he disliked and mistrusted, lacking the courage to tell her of his own feelings. Seeing her thrown from her horse had loosed his tongue, and sent her into his arms.

Odd, mused Hatfield, that it should be silent Mike Maugher who, after all, seemed likely to win the prize for which Prager had schemed and murdered.

Climbing the steps to the room where Nels Allenbow lay recuperating from his wound, Hatfield met the town doctor coming down.

"Doing fine," the medico assured him. "Bullet didn't miss the lung by far, but he's tough. He'll mend."

"Good," said Hatfield, and walked into the bedroom—and halted on the threshold,

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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THE KING OF BADWATER

Another Thrilling Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

staring, unprepared for what he saw.

A checkerboard lay on the blankets, within easy reach of the sick man's hand. Seated on the edge of the bed was bald, tough Oral Gant. As he entered Hatfield heard the Horseshoe boss cry, "Jumped my king, damn you!" and Allenbow's cackle of glee. Then they noticed the Ranger and the look on each face was strangely sheepish.

"All right," grunted Allenbow. "I reckon it does look funny. But if a man's been a fool he might as well admit it."

Gant nodded shortly. "That's right, Hatfield. We've missed out on a lot of checkers, in a year of senseless feuding!"

"The fence stays down then?"

There was the briefest of painful silences Then, with an embarrassed sidelong glance at Allenbow, Gant muttered, "Hell with the fence!"

Sunshine streamed through the window, friendliness. And warm as the sunshine was the sound of a girl's young laughter that suddenly rang through the old house.

At the sound the two old men, who had been friends and then enemies, and now were on the way to being friends again, exchanged glances. Allenbow, sour-faced, suddenly began to grin a little.

"Looks like you could be right!"

"Looks like I am," agreed Gant.

Seeing the puzzled look the Ranger gave them, Allenbow explained, "He thinks we ought to pool our outfits, and me come and live with him at his place. I've lost my foreman. Ed Romaine's asked for his time, and I'm going to stake him so's he can try and get back that spread he had in the Brasada. And now it sure enough looks like I'm about to lose my nurse!" He shook his head. "I've dreaded this day!"

Jim Hatfield grinned then, as Oral Gant pointed out the bright side:

"After all, Nels, with both of us in the same house we can sure get caught up on a hell of a lot of checkers." ●●●

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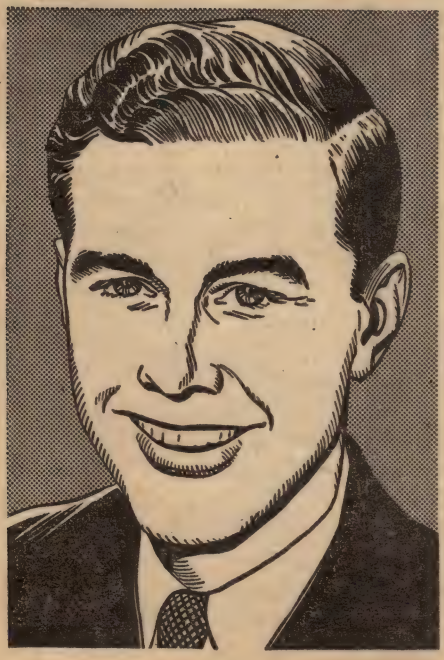

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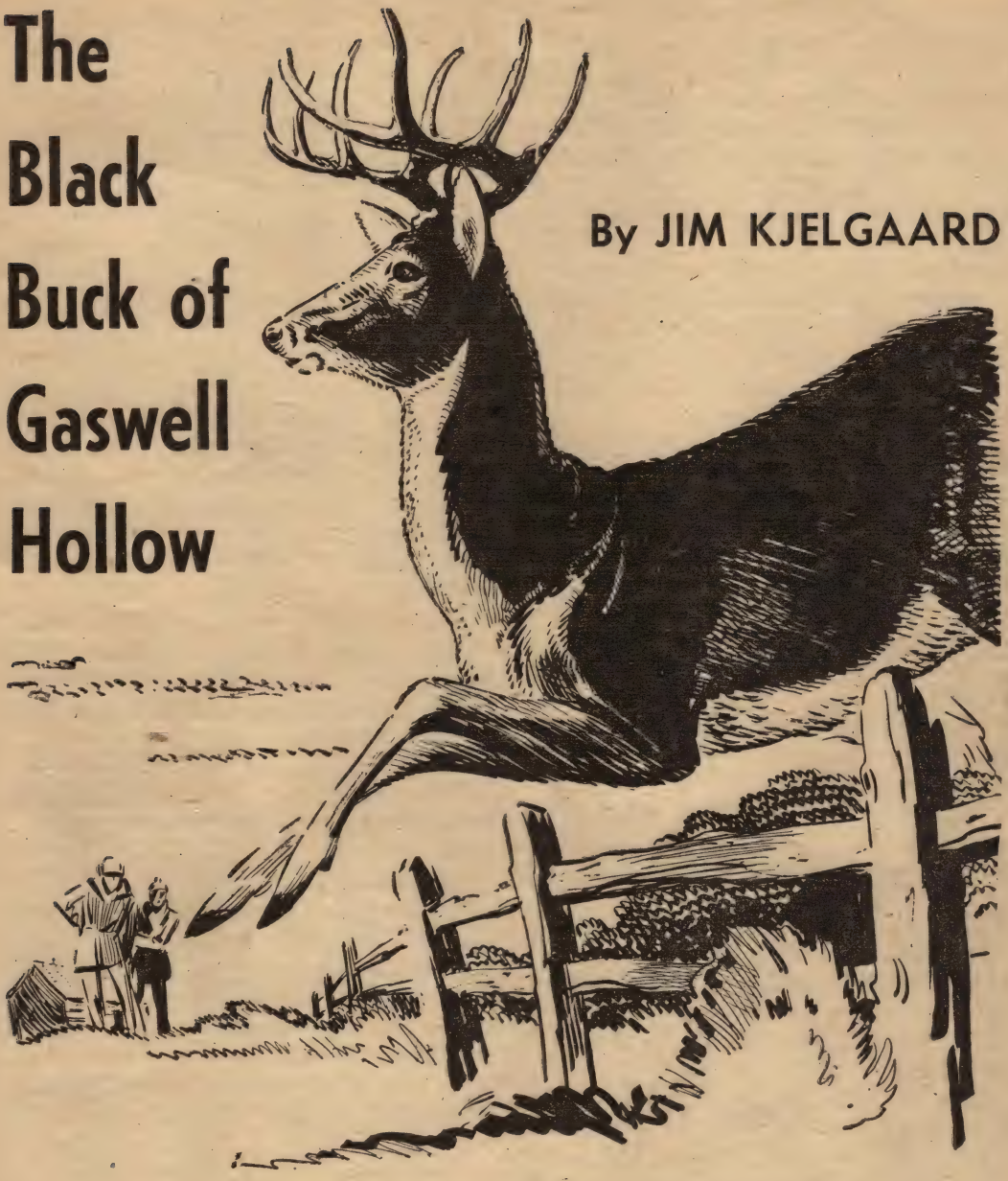
The Black Buck of Gaswell Hollow

By JIM KJELGAARD



He was quite a buck, the black one, but my Uncle Horace was quite a hunter, too

I LOOKED anxiously forward to my year in Idaho with Uncle Horace because I'd been told he was a great hunter. I had not been with him a week before I discovered that what he was, was a great worker.

When I got to his farm he put me to work helping dig potatoes. Then we had to chop and saw the winter wood, and I

decided I could manage to live nicely ever afterward if I never had to chop wood.

By the time the wood was cut I knew my father had deceived me. He had spent hours telling me that when Uncle Horace took a bear's trail the bear was as good as hung on the game hooks. He could track and kill the wisest buck, the biggest elk, the wariest bobcat. When it came to hunting, Uncle Horace could do anything.

Only he didn't do anything except work, and right after supper he went to bed. Sometimes he wouldn't say three words in one day, and when he said five he had talked himself out.

Then came the first light snow—and I saw that snow work magic with my Uncle Horace.

Usually, when I went to the barn mornings to help him milk, he just grunted something that might have been, "Damn these cows!" This morning he was standing in the doorway rubbing his hands together, and his eyes were not dull. They glowed.

"Ah, William!" he said. "Did you ever see finer weather or a prettier sight?"

"I guess not, Uncle Horace."

"And you never will!" he said. "This weather makes a man glad he's living!"

"Why—yes, Uncle Horace."

All day long he kept talking like that. And when he wasn't talking, he would be leaning on a shovel when he was supposed to be cleaning a stall, and staring out the door. A happy grin seemed painted on his face and he just didn't seem to care if he worked or not.

Instead of tumbling into bed right after supper he took a repeating shotgun out of its case, cleaned it, and kept up a running fire of comment about shotguns. He said some people were actually so low-down they'd use a double-barreled shotgun on birds. They were not sportsmen. What a man wanted was just one full-choke barrel. If he couldn't get birds with that, he didn't deserve any.

For a moment he seemed to go far away. Then he said:

"But just wait until we get after the black buck of Gaswell Hollow!"

DURING the next month I found out that my father had told me the truth about Uncle Horace. He *was* a hunter, and a great one, and with the hunting season on he seemed to think of nothing else. If Aunt Alice and I hadn't milked the cows they might not have been milked at all.

One morning I said to her:

"Uncle Horace sure likes hunting, doesn't he?"

Aunt Alice smiled. "Don't you, William?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't like to go all day and every day, like he does."

"It's his only relaxation, William, and the rest of the year he works sixteen hours a day. But during the hunting season! You haven't seen anything yet. Wait until deer season comes and your Uncle Horace starts hunting the black buck of Gaswell Hollow."

"What's that?"

"The biggest buck in the world, William. It lives in Gaswell Hollow and your Uncle Horace's fondest dream is to bag it. He's been hunting it for five years."

"*Is* there such a buck?"

"Oh, yes," Aunt Alice said. "You'll know when you go along with him to hunt it."

Uncle Horace came back that night with two partridges, three rabbits, and five squirrels, but again he seemed far away. As he dressed the game his eyes kept straying toward the calendar. Ever since the fourteenth of November he had been crossing each day out with a red pencil. Now he rubbed his hands together, and he sounded satisfied when he said:

"A—a—ah!"

"You seem happy, Uncle Horace," I commented.

"And why shouldn't I be?" Uncle Horace was beaming. "See that calendar? How many days must pass before December first?"

"Only two, Uncle Horace."

"Absolutely right, William! Then I'll have another chance at the black buck of Gaswell Hollow!"

Uncle Horace went to his gun cabinet

and brought out a cased rifle. The case was old and shabby, and the rifle was old, but there was nothing shabby about it. It had been oiled and polished until it glowed like a light almost hidden beneath layers of dark cloth. The mechanism was well-oiled, too.

He pushed a ramrod with a cloth patch on it through the muzzle, held the rifle up to the light and looked through it. He handled that rifle as carefully as a cautious mother would handle a baby—wouldn't let me touch it at all.

Uncle Horace didn't go hunting the next morning.

He was up long before I was, and by the time I got out to the barn he had most of the chores finished. But it was easy to see he wasn't interested in chores. He kept staring toward the snow-covered mountains, his eyes dreamy.

Right after dinner when all the work was caught up, he said, "Come along, William."

He got his rifle and we went to the field back of the barn. He put an empty tin can on a rock that jutted out of the snow, and backed off a hundred yards. When he shot, the tin can bounced into the air, and Uncle Horace shot again while it was up. The can bounced, whirled into soft snow, and stopped. Uncle Horace shot a third time, drove the can deeper into the snow, and said:

"Fetch the can, William."

When I picked it up I saw three bullet-holes so close together that a silver dollar would have covered all of them. Uncle Horace was a marvelous shot, but he just looked at the can, threw it down, and went back to his everlasting staring at the mountains.

He said dreamily, "William, day after tomorrow you and I hunt the black buck!"

IF I live to be older than Methuselah, I'm never going to forget the great hunt for the black buck of Gaswell Hollow.

All day before the hunt started, Uncle Horace had worked like a madman and insisted on my doing the same. He was catching up on every job he could think of so he would have all fifteen days of the season to hunt the black buck.

That night he explained to me just how we must hunt. I should be quiet, he said, and watch the wind all the time and always be careful of what was underfoot. The black buck of Gaswell Hollow was not only as smart as a human being; he was a whole lot smarter. Plenty of expert hunters had tried to get him and the buck was still carrying his rack of prize antlers around Gaswell Hollow.

"Is he really black, Uncle Horace?" I asked.

"The blackest buck I ever saw!" Uncle Horace said. "Go to bed now, William. We start at daybreak. . . ."

Night was still as black as the under side of a crow's wing when Uncle Horace shook me awake. I snapped on the light and looked at the clock. It was only half-past three.

"Come on, William!" said Uncle Horace. "We must get the chores done and be about our hunting."

He was in the barn and had two cows milked when I got there. He worked furiously. Time seemed important to him, but it still was only a quarter to five when we went back to the house and ate the breakfast Aunt Alice had ready.

After breakfast Uncle Horace fidgeted, and even though he tried to sit quietly, he couldn't. Every few minutes he went to the door and looked out. At about six he began taking his rifle outside so he could squint over the sights. Finally he stuck his head inside the door.

"Hurry, William! Shooting light is here!"

In the dim, gray morning I felt some of the urge that was so intense in Uncle Horace. It was a good day, a hunter's day, and nobody with any feeling at all could fail to sense it. It was not cold, but neither was it warm. The breeze that swept up the valley had exactly the right tang. The soft snow seemed to reflect all the promise in a new-born day, and the

hills were calling.

Uncle Horace led the way, striking through the snow straight up the hill and around the curving nose that led to Gaswell Hollow. I had already been there a couple of times, and I knew that the hollow was so named because somebody had once drilled a gas well in it. The hollow, and the hills flanking it, were a wonderful tangle of young aspen and laurel. When we came to the tangle Uncle Horace wet his finger and held it up to find the wind direction.

Then he whispered, "The black buck likely bedded last night in a thicket near the valley. Don't talk any more, and do as I do."

Softly as a cat on a velvet carpet, Uncle Horace started walking through the snow. I followed, trying to do everything he did and I thought I was doing it, but once or twice Uncle Horace turned around and scowled at me. He cut his speed; we went so slowly that a turtle could have whizzed by us.

Uncle Horace, stalking a thick laurel patch near the bottom of the valley, had his rifle ready when he came to it. Suddenly he shook his head, disappointed.

"He did bed here!" he whispered. "But he's gone!"

I saw the buck's tracks. I had seen many deer tracks, but they were bigger than any I had ever seen, and round, and they made a straight line in the snow. The black buck had not been alarmed; he had walked away from his bed instead of running.

"Let's chase him!" I said eagerly.

"Easy does it!"

Still slowly, barely moving, Uncle Horace started out on the trail. From far off we heard a rifle boom, then another, as other hunters shot. Uncle Horace didn't even turn his head.

THE black buck took us to the top of the hill, through a laurel thicket, and down the other side. Still Uncle Horace followed.

Rifles were booming all around now, so there must have been plenty of hunters out, but the black buck did not go near any of them. He did not even lead us near any hunters' tracks. Obviously he was pretty wise.

Toward noon, just as we were quartering down the side of a small gulley, I saw a deer—a buck with a nice rack. I nudged Uncle Horace.

"There's a nice buck," I whispered.

Uncle Horace frowned. "That's not the black buck, William. I don't want him."

But we did not get the black buck that day. Nor, though we started at daybreak and hunted until sunset, did we get him any other day. We tried everything Uncle Horace could think of. When we could not walk the black buck down by trailing we tried standing in places where Uncle Horace thought the buck might pass. That was no good, either, so we tried driving. Uncle Horace would post himself and I would beat through the brush in an attempt to drive the black buck to him. That didn't work.

Nothing, not even Uncle Horace's last day strategy, did us any good. At almost the last hour of the last day we were again on the black buck's trail—and there was no mistaking that trail—when Uncle Horace stopped suddenly.

He whispered, "William, if he stays on this runway that buck is bound to pass Elephant Rock! Come on!"

Uncle Horace began running through the brush and brambles, and didn't stop for anything. Whipping branches slapped our faces and snags ripped our clothes. We were sweating and breathless when we finally came to Elephant Rock, and we saw where the buck had passed it a few minutes before. And night was falling.

Again the buck had proved himself too smart for a hunter.

After the deer season, there was fox hunting, and two or three times a week Uncle Horace and I went out with a neighbor, Slim Hayden, and Slim's dog, Prince. The fox hunting was a lot of fun, but as the winter wore on, the snows

deepened and made it hard for Prince to get through.

Then came the great February storm.

I know that great February storms do occur in other places, but nothing is ever going to convince me that they're as great as they are in Potter County, Idaho. We rose to see an overcast sky, and about four hours later that sky started to spill snow. No ordinary snow, such as might fall in October, but snow so thick and whirling so fast that we could get only glimpses of the barn from the kitchen window. Three times in an hour I swept the porch, and when night came it was still snowing.

The next morning the sky was clear and blue. But the snow remained after the clouds had departed. Great feathery drifts lay all over, and even where there were no drifts there was still plenty of snow. It took Uncle Horace and me almost two hours to shovel a path to the barn, and where we had to go through drifts we heaped snow over our heads.

Uncle Horace did not say much that day, or the next, but he kept studying the hills. Then came a thaw followed by a hard freeze, and a thick crust formed on the packed snow. Uncle Horace spoke the thoughts that had been on his mind since the great snow had fallen.

"William, the deer in the hills are in a bad way."

"Why?"

"Because," Uncle Horace said, "they can't get food. We'll have to feed them."

The next morning we got up at daylight, which was something we had not done since deer season. Uncle Horace and I did the chores, then he went to the barn and pulled a long toboggan from its rack. He stuffed gunny sacks full of his best alfalfa, lashed them on the toboggan, and off we went.

WALKING was easy; the crust bore our weight and the toboggan slid behind us. We traveled up the hill into the forest, and had barely got there when we saw deer.

They had come down from the heights and the deep snow and were yarded in a little grove of trees at the foot of a hill. The herd had beaten some trails, and the trees had been browsed as high as a big deer could reach. They did not run when they saw us, but just sort of crowded at one end of the grove while we worked at the other. Uncle Horace took from its sheath a belt ax he had brought along and chopped down a great heap of boughs. He had scarcely backed away when the deer came to eat.

We went on, and almost everywhere deer were yarded. Uncle Horace chopped boughs for them, and left some bags full of alfalfa wherever he thought there were not enough boughs. The deer never hesitated to come right up and eat.

Then we came to a long stretch of almost unbroken snow and started across it, because Uncle Horace thought that there might be another deer yard at the upper end of the valley. I was pulling the toboggan while he walked ahead of me, and he stopped so suddenly I nearly bumped into him.

"Great jumping catfish!" I heard him exclaim.

He was looking at some broken marks in the snow, and he turned to follow them. I knew that a deer had walked here. However, though the crust would hold Uncle Horace and myself, it would not hold the deer. His small hoofs had broken through; he was having a hard time. Blood marked the trail he had taken.

Uncle Horace looked at me, and his eyes were anxious.

"William, those tracks were left by the black buck!"

"The black buck!"

"Yes," said Uncle Horace, "and he's in trouble. I don't know why. A buck as smart as he is certainly went in a yard. Maybe a dog chased him out, but he is out. We must hurry!"

Uncle Horace set off at a dead run along the black buck's trail. I followed, snaking the toboggan behind me, and as I ran I could see that the black buck was really

in trouble. The blood marks occurred more frequently. There were a couple of places where the buck had stopped to rest, and at such places there was a lot of blood. Presently I heard Uncle Horace, who had run ahead of me, yell:

"Here he is!"

I panted up. The buck stood shoulder deep in the snow, looking at Uncle Horace. He wanted to fight, but he was too far gone. He had shed his antlers. His head sank lower, until it rested on the snow. He tried to run and couldn't. Uncle Horace walked slowly to his side.

"Help me get him on the toboggan," he said.

Uncle Horace touched him, and the buck quivered like a high-strung horse. Then he relaxed. He had run as far as he could and fought as hard as he could, and he was able to do no more. His head sank back on the snow. He groaned.

Uncle Horace got him around the neck, lifted, and laid him on the snow. I saw the big gash in his side; a dog or some other animal had driven the black buck from his yard. Then, with Uncle Horace lifting from the back and me from the front, we put the black buck on the toboggan and strapped him there.

"We got to get him home," said Uncle Horace, "and fast!"

I ran beside Uncle Horace as we pulled the black buck to the barn. Uncle Horace took his young colt out of a box stall, put him in a manger stall, and carried the buck inside the box stall.

"Get me some horse blankets," Uncle Horace directed, "and go tell your Aunt Alice I want the brandy."

ALL that day and all night Uncle Horace nursed the black buck. He was haggard and worn when morning came, and the buck had not yet got up.

Uncle Horace said, "Watch him, William. I am going to get my breakfast. Tell me at once if he tries to get on his feet."

I watched the black buck. He lay on one horse blanket and under two. For about ten minutes he didn't move. Then he raised his head and looked about. He struggled to his feet.

"Uncle Horace!" I shouted.

He was already beside me. He had gulped his breakfast and come right back. For a second he looked worried, then he rubbed his hands together and his eyes beamed. The black buck staggered weakly to some hay and began to eat. He was getting better.

We kept him in the box stall until the real thaw came. Then we opened the door and let him out. The black buck of Gaswell Hollow looked at Uncle Horace, then he looked at me, then he bounded toward the mountainside. He cleared a fence, flashed into the forest, and was gone.

Uncle Horace rubbed his hands together.

"Ah!" he said. "Good! Now when December comes I will have something to look forward to! This year, beyond any doubt, I will bag the black buck of Gaswell Hollow!"

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Big Sam McGee, Brooklyn's gift to the West, would take fists over guns every time.

Well, almost every time. . . .

The right fist crashed hard into the pit of his stomach

THE BOUNCER

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

IF THERE was one thing Big Sam McGee knew he would never get used to in this far West country it was guns, the way they all carried guns on their hips from fourteen-year-old boys to grandfathers, and the way they used those guns.

In the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, where he'd been raised, he'd seen toughs carry guns, but they were toys compared to the big, blue-barreled weapons the Westerners wore on their hips, .44- and .45-caliber cannons, capable of doing terrific damage, especially at the close quarters—as they were usually used. Only

the other night he'd seen a man shot through the stomach at the Empire Bar where he worked. It had not been a pretty sight.

Big Sam munched a sandwich, sipped the only beer he would have all night, then leaned one big elbow on the bar. Aside from the guns, he was well-satisfied with his job as bouncer in the Empire. They were paying him good money, more than he'd ever made in his life, because money was plentiful in this trail town of Travis City. Cowboys roaming the streets, just in from a couple of months on the trail up from Texas, didn't want their money to burn holes in their pockets. They spent freely, lavishly, and the saloons and gambling houses that hauled in tremendous profits paid their help accordingly. Besides, Sam slept on the premises after the saloon closed up at night, or nearer the early hours of morning.

The work was not hard, and after he'd tossed a few drunks out through the doors and bounced together the heads of several more who'd wanted to start a free-for-all, the customers of the Empire more or less respected him. He was big and he knew how to use his hands, having been a bare-knuckles fighter for more than a dozen years.

He still didn't like guns, though. The thought of those guns kept him awake at night. He could hear them boom in his sleep.

Right now he was watching a red-headed boy of about fifteen swagger up to the bar, a big Navy Colt on his right hip. They started young in Texas, and this one undoubtedly had just come in off the trail, downy-cheeked, wide-eyed, trying hard to prove he was a man.

BIG Sam grinned a little as he pushed away from the bar and stepped outside on the porch. It was still early evening with the night trade not starting for another hour or so. The Empire Saloon was practically deserted at this hour, but the gambler, John Avery, was already at his table playing solitaire, his long, white fingers manipulating the cards with his accustomed ease. The slim gambler nodded when Big Sam went by and Sam, because he was a gentleman, touched his derby hat in acknowledgment.

He liked John Avery, the quiet, honest gambler, who nightly sat at that corner table plying his trade. Mr. Avery treated him like a gentleman, too; never condescendingly. John Avery had never smiled at his tight-fitting black Eastern suit, nor at his blunt-nosed Eastern shoes and black derby. It was John Avery who had placed a small stack of silver dollars in his big palm the night he'd stepped off the train, dusty, hungry, broke, drifting into the Empire for a handout.

Sam, out on the porch, was leaning one shoulder against a pillar, watching the riders coming in from their camps across the railroad tracks, when he heard the batwing doors squeak gently behind him.

John Avery came out, lighting a slim, brown Mexican *cigarillo*. Nodding to Sam, he said, "A pleasant evening, Sam."

"Very nice," Sam agreed. "Cool after a hot afternoon."

John Avery passed him one of the *cigarillos* and Sam lighted up, thanking him. They stood there for a few moments, enjoying the smokes. A group of riders pounded down Main Street, drawing up in front of the Texas Saloon across the road. Others tied up at the rack in front of the Empire and stamped past the two men leaning against the pillars on either side of the porch steps.

"Saturday night," Sam observed. "Should be a big house, Mr. Avery."

Avery nodded. He was watching two riders pulling up in front of the Empire. One of them Sam immediately recognized as the notorious Texas gun-thrower, Ace Moran.

Moran was a slim, hook-nosed, sallow-skinned man on a big bay mount. He'd hit Travis City a week before, and had been frequenting the Empire, playing occasionally at John Avery's table. Big Sam had noticed that he'd been losing money, too, and that he was not a good loser.

Ace Moran spotted them as he ducked under the tie-rack and came up on the

walk. The gun on his hip was a Smith & Wesson, .44 caliber, pearl-handled affair. According to talk in Travis City, Moran had eleven killings to his credit, and some were saying that he would like to add John Avery to his list because Avery had absorbed his pile in stud poker.

Avery nodded politely as Moran went past. Ace Moran scarcely looked at him. He flashed a quick look at Sam McGee out of his hooded, colorless eyes, then the batwing doors squeaked as he went in with his companion.

Sam McGee thought he heard John Avery sigh faintly, and that was his first premonition of trouble tonight. He didn't like to think of it. Mr. Avery carried a small black Derringer in his sleeve, but what good was a pea-shooter like that against Moran's heavy Smith & Wesson?

Sam asked, "Think Moran will play at your table tonight, Mr. Avery?"

John Avery nodded. "He has been playing there all week," he stated. "I believe he will keep on trying his luck at my table."

"He's starting trouble," Sam said gloomily. "You better watch him, Mr. Avery."

"Thank you." Avery smiled. He took the cigar from his mouth, looked at it, then turned and walked leisurely into the saloon.

Big Sam McGee watched him glumly. He had visions of a gun duel, and likeable John Avery crumpling to the floor with Moran's heavy caliber slugs in him. That was what he didn't like to think about.

MORE riders were coming in now as darkness fell, their horses kicking up the alkali dust as they hammered down long, straggly Main Street. Other men came out of hotels and boarding houses along the way—tanned, slender, wiry men, some of them as tough and as ornery as the longhorn Texas steers they drove up the trail from the Lone Star state.

Sam McGee liked them all, except the cold-eyed killers like Ace Moran with big guns on their hips, and the urge to use those guns. With the *cigarillo* in his mouth jutting toward the porch ceiling, Sam walked back into the saloon and took up his accustomed position at one end of the bar.

Harry McVey, the bartender, nodded to him, slapped at the bar with his rag, and said softly:

"I don't like that Moran in here tonight, Sam."

Sam scowled and shook his head.

"If he sits at John Avery's table," McVey went on, "there'll be trouble. You mark what I say, Sam."

"I could bust his head," Sam mumbled, "and throw him out on the street."

Harry McVey laughed. "They'd bury you on boot hill, McGee," he said. "You don't fight a man like Ace Moran with fists."

McVey was right and Big Sam knew it. If trouble came tonight between John Avery and Ace Moran they would have to settle it themselves. He could have broken Moran in half with his hands, but the gun made the difference—always the gun.

The Empire was becoming crowded now, and there was a lot of noise at the bar. Sam spotted Moran at the other end, drinking silently with his companion, a dark-skinned man with a scar across his right cheek.

A half-dozen riders stormed through the doors, nearly tearing them from their hinges. They were young Texans just in with a trail herd; dusty, thirsty, wild-eyed. The ramrod for the outfit, a big, red-haired fellow with freckles and pale blue eyes, bellied up to the bar and boomed:

"Drinks for the house on the Anchor!"

There were yells of approval from the customers, and then a rush for the bar. Big Sam remained at the elbow of the bar where he could look down the entire length and watch the drinkers.

The three bartenders rushed the drinks out, sliding them up and down the mahogany, the liquor spilling.

The big redhead boomed again, "On the Anchor! Everything on the Anchor tonight, gents!"

Harry McVey, knowing that Sam never touched the stuff when working, didn't set

out a drink for him, and the Anchor ramrod noticed it immediately. He pointed a big, bony finger at Sam and said to McVey:

"Forget one, bartender?"

Sam McGee smiled across at him and shook his head. He saw the frown on the redhead's face, and sighed. First these Texans frowned, and then they scowled; then it was a soft remark, and after that fists or guns. This big fellow would use his fists. He was not the killer type, even though he wore a Colt .45 on his hip.

The Anchor ramrod said to Sam, "You ain't drinking with us, friend?"

He'd pushed back from the bar and taken two steps in Sam's direction. He was about five feet away when he spoke.

"I work here," Sam told him. "Never drink during working hours, mister. I thank you kindly."

"Thank me hell!" the Texan exploded. "When an Anchor man calls for drinks on the house that means everybody. Reckon that includes you, mister."

Sam shook his head sadly, but firmly. "Not me," he said. "Can't keep order in this house, my friend, with liquor in my belly."

That was one rule he had in his business, a rule which he never broke, knowing the consequences of it. If he drank with one man he'd have to drink with another, or they would look upon it as an affront. He'd always refused the first one, which automatically settled the matter.

IT WASN'T going to settle this matter, though, not if he understood the look in the big Texan's pale eyes. The man had already had a drink or two elsewhere before coming into the Empire, and the liquor had warmed him up inside. He stepped around his grinning companions and walked up to Sam, looking him over from head to foot.

"Eastern man?" he murmured.

"Brooklyn." Sam nodded. "God's own country."

"Don't tell me," the Texan drawled. "And you ain't drinking with poor Texas trash. Is that it, my friend?"

"House policy," Sam told him. "House man should not drink."

"And you're the house man here?" the Texan asked. He was standing in front of Sam, a big man, possibly an inch taller than Sam, but not as thick in the shoulders.

"That's right." Sam nodded.

"Reckon you see there ain't any trouble in the place—that it?" the Texan asked him.

"That's it," Sam McGee agreed affably.

"Ain't no trouble now, is there?" the Texan asked.

"Don't see any," Sam smiled.

The Texan reached out, placed two big fingers against Sam's snap bow tie, pulled the bow out and let it snap against the Adam's apple.

"Reckon you might call that a little trouble, mister," he murmured.

There were howls from the other Texans. Big Sam McGee was still smiling pleasantly as he adjusted the bow tie. Stepping back from the bar he looked down at his shoes, then at the knuckles of his hands.

He said softly, "Would you step away from the bar, my friend."

The big Texan, not sure what was coming, moved back. He was poised, ready to fight if he had to, and with his fists, which Big Sam liked and appreciated. He almost hated to do what he did next.

Straight and tall, he was standing within striking range of the Texan, then he started his left hand up toward the Texan's face. The fist traveled fast, but it didn't go to the mark.

The big Texan started instinctively to duck, and didn't see the right fist which crashed into the pit of his stomach after the left stopped midway toward his face.

As the Texan's breath whooshed out and he bent over double, Sam McGee's left fist moved again, short, stiff, like a piston rod. That left met the point of the Texan's chin as it came down, and the head and upper part of the ramrod's body swirled upward. His legs became limp and he fell back. His shoulders and the back of his head struck the sawdust-strewn

floor, and he lay there without moving a muscle, arms outstretched.

Big Sam McGee rubbed his knuckles gently on the lapels of his coat. The other Texans were watching, stunned, as Sam stepped forward and swung the big man up across his shoulders. As he headed toward the back room with him, he called over his shoulder to McVey:

"Bucket of water, Harry, and a sponge, same as usual."

The Anchor ramrod came to five minutes later on the bunk in the back room, with Big Sam sloshing the wet sponge in his face. He sat up, spluttering, then rubbed his jaw tenderly and looked at Sam.

He said slowly, "What happened, mister?"

"You fell down," Sam told him amiably, "and banged your head on the floor."

The Texan stared at him. "Yeah," he murmured. He kept rubbing his chin, and said, "Reckon you don't want that drink, do you, friend?"

"Reckon not," Sam said.

The Texan grinned a little. "You kind of know your own mind," he chuckled. "I ain't pushing it—not any more."

Sam walked back into the barroom with him, slapped him on the back and headed for his place at the bar.

Harry McVey asked when he came up, "Everything all right, Sam?"

Sam nodded. "I feel well."

HE NOTICED that the Texans in the room were looking at him with vastly more respect, and that was the way he wanted it. During the remainder of the evening his presence alone might be enough to quell any minor disturbances, and drunks who became belligerent would permit him to lead them outside rather than risk being thrown through the batwing doors.

Harry McVey said significantly, "Ain't everything all right over there, Sam?" He nodded toward the table at which John Avery sat.

Sam, turning his head, saw Ace Moran just sitting down. Moran's back was toward the bar, so Sam couldn't see his face, but he could tell from the way the gunman moved, from the stiffness of his back, that trouble was brewing.

Avery sat completely relaxed, his flat-crowned black hat pulled low on his head, shoulders bent in a little as he shuffled the deck. Big Sam saw him turn his head and say a few words to the man at his right. And Sam realized that although Avery did not look at Ace Moran, he knew. Moran wasn't here tonight to win or to lose, but to kill.

The more McGee thought about that the less he liked it. Moran's scar-faced companion had taken a position along the wall and was watching the card games, smoking a cigar, but Sam saw his beady, black eyes constantly on John Avery. He and Moran were going to set up the gambler.

Big Sam stood against the bar and cracked his knuckles, a frown on his face. McVey shook his head at him as he poured a drink for a customer. McVey already considered John Avery a dead man.

After awhile, during a lull, Big Sam stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. A thick cloud of tobacco smoke filled the saloon now, and with the place jammed it was hot and uncomfortable.

Ace Moran still sat at the card table opposite John Avery, his thin face expressionless, nursing the small pile of chips in front of him. As McGee glanced back over the batwing doors he saw the man with the scarred face toss his stub of cigar into a spittoon. McGee didn't like Moran's associate being directly behind Avery. It was not good for Avery if trouble should break out.

A boy of about ten or twelve was squatting near the doorway, looking into the saloon under the doors. Sam McGee called to him:

"Bub."

The boy looked around and came over sheepishly when Sam hooked a finger at him. Lounging against the porch pillar, Sam said casually:

"See that fellow with the scar stand-

ing against the wall?" He jerked his head toward the door.

The boy nodded. "I see him."

Sam fished a coin from his pocket and flipped it to the boy. He said, "Tell him a friend of his is waiting down at the corner."

The boy ducked away, and Sam went down the steps, turned down toward the next corner and stepped into a dark alley about a dozen feet from the corner. He leaned against the wall of a building and blew on his knuckles. When he heard boot steps on the boardwalk he edged up closer to the mouth of the alley.

As the scar-faced man walked past the alley, Big Sam's left hand shot out. He hooked his fingers into the back of the man's shirt collar and jerked him into the alley.

The man let out a strangled yelp, his right hand groping for the gun on his hip. He had the gun half out of holster when Sam McGee's right fist collided with his jaw. He went limp, and Sam hoisted him up, stood him against the wall, then let him fall forward. He bent his own body slightly so that the scar-faced man fell across his shoulder, then straightened up with the man draped across it, and headed for the other end of the alley. There he stepped into the livery stable.

In a dark corner of the stable he dumped the unconscious man into an empty stall, took his gun from the holster, and tossed it into the hay loft overhead. He searched for and found a few pieces of rope with which he tied the fellow up.

FIVE minutes later he emerged from the stable, walked up the street and entered the Empire. He noticed that Ace Moran's small pile of chips was smaller. There had been two other men in the game, but one had dropped out, and there now was an empty chair.

Two young riders up at the bar were edging toward each other, fight in their eyes. Big Sam stepped between them, smiling blandly. He called for McVey to bring them a drink apiece, and they forgot their argument.

An hour went by. Sam, keeping close watch, ate another sandwich, wondering how long it would be before Moran made his play; wondering, too, what he could do about it. He could see Ace Moran's gun from where he stood, the pearl handle jutting from the holster.

Then he saw the scar-faced man coming through the door, a sour expression on his face. He had a gun in his holster again, and he looked over in Sam's direction suspiciously as he took his position against the wall. He'd undoubtedly been released by the livery man.

Ace Moran looked up, saw him, and decided it was the moment. He tossed his cards down on the table and said something to John Avery.

The gambler had been pulling in a small pot. His long hand stopped and he looked at Moran across the table, his features suddenly stiff.

Harry McVey, the bartender, said softly, "This is it, Sam!"

The third man at the card table suddenly got up and walked hurriedly toward the bar. Sam saw the scar-faced man pull away from the wall, his hands hooked in his gunbelt, lower jaw sagging a little, eyes narrowed.

John Avery was talking steadily, quietly, both hands flat on the top of the table. Then Ace Moran got up, kicking his chair to one side. Avery rose, too, and they stood there, facing each other across the round table.

The noise in the big room gradually quieted down. Card players at nearby tables got up hurriedly, shuffling their chairs as they moved away to get out of range of a possible bullet.

Big Sam McGee felt his throat getting dry, and a cold sweat broke out over his body. He wanted to help John Avery who'd helped him. He owed the likable gambler that much, but the sight of that gun on Ace Moran's hip froze him.

The scar-faced man had been edging toward the door, but he was watching Avery intently, waiting for his first move.

Sam McGee knew what he had in mind. The first move Avery made would draw fire from two different points, and John Avery expected trouble only from the man in front of him. He'd be caught in a crossfire here with little chance of surviving.

Moran undoubtedly was trying to get Avery to make a play, which meant that fireworks would begin almost any moment. Big Sam hesitated for one terribly long second, then he stepped away from the bar, moving toward one of the empty card tables. He cleared his throat and called quietly:

"Mr. Avery, there's another one of 'em over by the door."

Even as he spoke he knew he had to go into action. As John Avery swung to meet the new challenge, and as Ace Moran's right hand dipped for his gun, Big Sam snatched up a chair and hurled it across the room at Moran's legs.

The killer had his gun out when the chair smashed into his legs, catching him behind the knees. The gun went off but his aim was spoiled, the slug going into the floor.

Avery had leaped away from the table, whirling to fire at the scar-faced man by the door. Moran's confederate got off one shot, his bullet tearing through Avery's coat. The gambler's bullet didn't miss, and the scar-faced man crumpled beneath the batwing doors, his guns dropping from his fingers.

Moran never got a chance to use his gun again. Big Sam McGee was on top of him like a tornado, slamming him against the wall until his teeth were loosened and the gun jerked from his hands.

BIG SAM hit him a half-dozen short, vicious blows to the face, grabbed him when he started to fall, and pinned him against the wall again where he wriggled like a bug on a pin. He put his wide hard face close up to Moran's and rasped:

"You and your damned pea-shooters!"

He saw terror in the gunman's face and knew that this was the first time in his life Moran had ever been manhandled. Men had always been afraid of him, afraid of that big gun. Now that he'd been disarmed the courage fled from him. Sam watched the transformation in mute surprise, and as he did, fear of the gun left him. He released his grip on Ace Moran and shoved him away rudely.

He said tersely, "Move on, you bum, or you'll go through the door headfirst!"

Avery was standing back from the table, smiling, his gun still in his hand. Moran looked at him, then at Sam McGee. When Sam clenched a fist and started toward him again, he let out a sharp yell and broke for the door.

John Avery took Sam's arm and steered him toward the bar. He said softly, "I believe we both can break our rules tonight, Sam." He called for a bottle and two glasses.

Harry McVey grinned and set the glasses down before them. The bartender said jocularly, nodding toward Sam, "To Travis City's new badman?"

Avery looked at the bouncer. He said gently, "To Travis City's new good man, Harry, the kind we want around here."

Big Sam McGee had his drink as the crowd swarmed around them. He was part of this now, part of the great West.

NEXT ISSUE

THE TRAIL TO SAN JUAN

A Novelet of the Fighting Frontier

By RAY GAULDEN

Billy The Kid's Last Chance

a true story by LAURAN PAINE

IN THE annals of Western folklore few have achieved the notoriety and questionable fame of William H. Bonney, alias Billy The Kid. Few men of the old West, indeed, left as bloody a legacy acquired in so short a time, either. For by the time Billy was twenty-one years old he was reputed to have killed that many white men. He scornfully disclaimed knowledge of how many Mexicans and Indians he had shot to death. Otherwise, the count must necessarily have been much higher.

Billy, like so many outlaws, had one golden opportunity to escape the certain fate that must overtake all who live by the gun. And he let it slip between his fingers with complete lack of understanding. For William H. Bonney was a man with very little logic in his makeup, and no conscience whatsoever. Consequently

Here was a peace offering that might well have saved the Kid—if he weren't the Kid

it is quite likely that he did not recognize his one chance to live out his life span in peace as other men might have done.

The savage and bitter Lincoln County War was almost over with. Both Murphy and McSween were dead and the followers of both had gradually drifted on. Tunstall's murder was almost forgotten and the bloody past of Lincoln County was well on the way to becoming legend. Even so, however, there were still plenty of quick-triggered men riding the ranges and working in the commercial enterprises of the little towns that dotted upper New Mexico. And a man of Billy's capabilities never lacked for cronies when an opportunity for excitement came along.

About this time President Rutherford B. Hayes, a moral and religious man who took to heart the vicious reputation America—and especially the West—was getting by the escapades of such men as Billy The Kid, appointed General Lew Wallace as the Territorial Governor of New Mexico. Incidentally, General Wallace was the author of that great classic *Ben Hur*.

General Wallace arrived in New Mexico in late August, 1878. He was deeply impressed by the rawness of the people and the vastness of the country. The President's explicit orders to the General were to stop the feuding in New Mexico that caused such things as the Lincoln County War. This, of course, looked well on paper and even sounded well vocally. But just how one man was to take apart the quirks in every gunman's brain and sift out the hunches, hatreds and violent impulses wasn't made plain.

At any rate, the General made a study of the local situation and decided the best way to stop the feuding was to get hold of the most feared man on the scene and make an ally of him. This too looked good on paper and General Wallace can be pardoned his naiveté. He was not a Westerner, a handgun fighting man nor even a violent man. With this plan in mind General Lew sent word out that he wanted to talk with Billy the Kid.

There was some surprise that so high a personage as the Governor wanted to see Billy for a talk. The respectable folk of the County were strongly disapproving but their remarks were guarded since The Kid was known to have admirers in all parts of and stations of life in Lincoln County.

AFTER assuring himself that Wallace's offer of a conference was without mischief or malice, Billy sent word that he would meet the General at the Ellis House in Lincoln at the Governor's convenience.

Lew Wallace was a frank, open-minded man. And, while he wanted in the worst way to comply with the President's order to stop the bloodshed and warring in New Mexico, he seriously doubted that he had the ability to discourage it. Apparently his lack of conviction sprang from the fact that he was in no acceptable sense fitted for the task.

By education, environment and training Wallace was not equal to handling independent gunmen. But he overlooked one quality he possessed that has always stood for more in the West than any other virtue. He was frank and honest and unassuming. These factors alone made him admired, grudgingly perhaps, but admired nevertheless by the Westerners. Doubting but willing, Lew Wallace agreed to meet The Kid at the Ellis House.

There was unrequited tension in the air the day of the interview despite strict orders that no guns were to be worn in or near the hotel until both participants in the discussion were out of sight and the talks had terminated.

Billy met Governor Wallace with his rifle in his hand and his pistol displayed openly on his right hip. General Lew was mildly surprised. He had expected someone larger, a little older and certainly more villainous looking. The two men sat, at Billy's insistence, with their backs to the wall where they could watch the entrance of the room.

General Lew told The Kid of President Hayes's order to stop the violence in Lin-

coln County specifically and New Mexico in general. The Kid agreed that it should stop and surprisingly enough, said he was tired of fighting, running and killing.

General Wallace then offered his plan. "Well sir," the General said, "knowing you feel as I do about the troubles here, I will personally give you my word that, if you'll let yourself be taken and tried, and in the event you are convicted, I'll pardon you by employing the powers vested in me and in that way you can start life anew and the past will be past. And I'm quite certain that your example will alter the present violence in the Territory."

The Kid thought for a long moment. Here, for the last time in his hectic and brief career, was golden opportunity knocking with a sledge hammer in its fist, battering at the door of restriction that Billy had built around himself.

"General," he said finally, "I thank you for the offer and I know you would do as you say. But I've killed too many men, and they all have friends and kinsmen who wouldn't hesitate to shoot me if they dared. I wouldn't gamble much money on my future. I may live for a few years yet and, on the other hand, I may be killed when I walk out of this room—I don't know. But this I do know; it is too late for me to turn back."

General Wallace recognized the truth in what The Kid said but he couldn't give up so easily. "There is no reason to believe that you couldn't go somewhere else, like California for instance, and start over. You're young and a whole lifetime is before you."

Billy smiled ruefully and his buck teeth showed up prominently. "General, the people who want to kill me would find me no matter where I went and in a strange community I'd stand less chance of living than I would here where I know the land and have friends.

GOVERNOR WALLACE admitted defeat to himself. "Then there is nothing I can say or do that will deter you from continuing with your old life?"

The Kid arose, watching the door like a hawk. "No sir, I'm afraid not, but I appreciate your interest and your offer."

General Wallace saw the inflexible will in the outlaw's bright eyes and arose also. The interview was ended and Lew Wallace felt a hollow sense of having failed. He offered his hand to The Kid who took it and the two men said good-by.

General Wallace returned to the Governor's mansion at Santa Fe. Soon after this he began the monumental task of creating his classic story "Ben Hur" and, between his exemplary life as an officer and a gentleman, and his literary contribution in the nature of his eternal novel, lived out a good life.

Billy The Kid returned to his old life and the thunder of his sixgun left gaping holes in the pages of New Mexico's history where the red blood and virile life of his victims continued to fall where he met them.

In the fall of 1878, some time after his talk with General Lew, The Kid made Fort Sumner his headquarters and turned to cattle stealing as a livelihood. During this time he killed many men, but—and it's a small "but"—he did not rob banks, trains or stages as some historians claim. His enterprises, at this time were confined to stealing cattle and selling them. He had victims and customers alike the length and breadth of the New Mexico Territory.

In the course of his life at Fort Sumner The Kid met Pat Garrett many times. It is quite possible that they did some business at that time. However, when Garrett was elected Sheriff of Lincoln County the outlaw knew exactly where he stood. And from then on his attitude, and Garrett's, altered according to their new position in relation to one another.

Garrett was a tight-fisted, quick-tempered man, better than the outlaw by reason of his official status alone. He was not a popular man and later on met his death while attempting to intimidate another man, a tenant of his, who got an edge on him exactly as he got one on Billy The Kid.

Two years after The Kid and Lew Wal-

lace met, Billy was so close to the gallows that he could hear them being built. At this time he expressed confidence that the Governor would send a pardon. Of course Wallace's offer of a pardon had been made to cover only the circumstances and conditions he had outlined at the time of the meeting.

But The Kid chose to think of the clemency offer as lasting and certain. He was only kidding himself and he knew it. However, when the pardon did not materialize, Billy stated publicly, "I mean to ride into the plaza at Santa Fe, tie up my horse at the Palace, and pump a bullet into Lew Wallace."

This intention never came any closer than a threat, however, because after Billy shot his way to freedom he lived only a short while longer and was too busy hiding during that time, trying to squeeze a few more hours or days out of a wasted existence. In the end, he was shot to death by Pat Garrett in about the only way he could have been killed, by being caught off guard for a fraction of a second. Just long enough for an assassin's bullet to stop his heart while he himself had nothing more deadly on his person than a butcher knife.

Billy's bloody span of existence was brief and hectic. He had built a mass of intrigue and hatred around himself which he might never have been able to escape, as he was convinced he couldn't. But on the other hand there are ample proven cases where gunmen changed not only their way of life but their names and places of residence and lived to ripe old age, forgotten or undiscovered by their enemies.

It could have happened, too, in Billy's case. But the last chance he had to leave the shadowy world of the owlhoot trail was at the Ellis House when virtual amnesty was offered him with no strings attached.

In turning it down, he sealed his own doom. Such an opportunity comes only once in the lifetime of a gunman. ●●●

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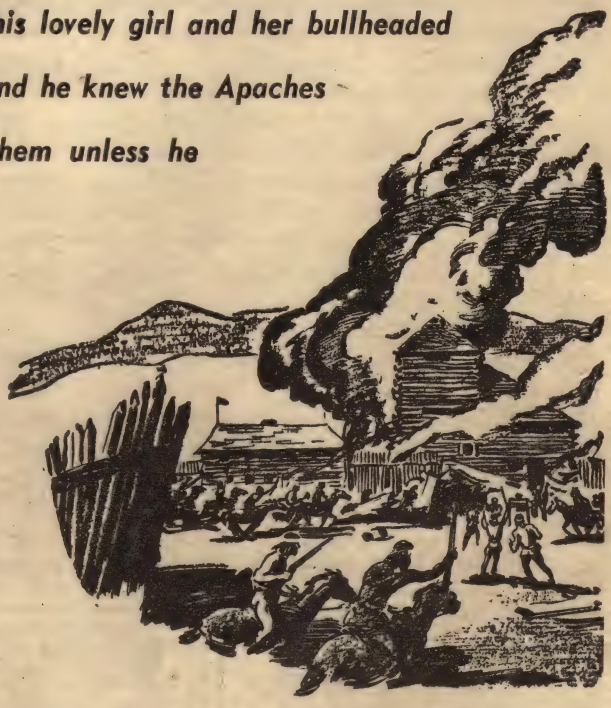
FORT OF FURY

Mason knew they hated him, this lovely girl and her bullheaded brother who was in command, and he knew the Apaches would lift the hair of all of them unless he took swift, drastic measures



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a novelet by

STEUART EMERY

CHAPTER I

Indian Trouble

EVEN the slight motion of turning in saddle sent the throbbing ache of over-strained and exhausted muscles tearing through him. And he knew that the same pain racked the frame of every trooper in the patrol detail that plodded the sands behind him.

Bloodshot eyes stared over alkali-caked handkerchief masks from under the low-pulled brims of campaign hats. Swaying men and horses alike were coated thick, and thirst joined with fatigue to make the last miles to the fort intolerable. The corporal riding right on the leading file wore a clumsy bandage wrapped about his head where Apache lead had grazed, two privates rode with limp wounded men lashed on behind them.

It had been hours of solid chase that had ended with the stringy-maned killers cornered and turned into good Apaches. The proof of their killing fury sagged in the crimson-stained blanket strapped onto a horse, being taken back for decent burial because the body was that of a white woman who had been mercilessly done away with when the blue uniforms had closed in. The Apaches hadn't left enough of the three men beside the burned wagons to do more than scrape sand over them.

First Lieutenant Alvin Mason, at the head of a twenty-trooper patrol from Fort Williams, had gone out for a routine reconnaissance—and he had brought back the full-fledged Indian war he had predicted for this spring in Arizona.

Clawfist, the Apache raider, knew what it meant when a white woman was butchered. Torque, his sub-chief brother, knew it also.

Pulling a little to the side Mason could see the flat-angled face of the captured killer, Torque, beady eyes venomous as a rattlesnake's as he rode with hands bound behind him and feet lashed under his pony's belly, a brawny sergeant holding the halter of the prisoner's mount at the rear of the column. Torque was the right-hand fighting chief of his brother, whose own right hand was a scarred and withered claw from some old wound that had paralyzed it. Yes, the war was on when Clawfist, who had been holed up all the bitter winter down below the Border, sent his murderous brother across it to raid, with eight hundred more Apaches on the reservation taking Government beef and shelter through the cold months.

THE threat of battle came as regularly as the blooming of the cactus each spring. Would the reservation bucks break out and join Clawfist in a career of freedom and killing, or would they stay put, farming and hunting what game there was on the Government land allowed them?

Mason caught Torque's glowering scowl and tried to interpret it. He himself, as Intelligence Officer of Fort Williams, had drawn up the report that Colonel Church had forwarded to Southwest Department

Headquarters six weeks ago, predicting that this spring Clawfist would go mad dog to bolster his waning power, and cross the Border for great coups of killing and looting that would bring a coppery-brown army racing to him off the reservation.

Now Mason had made the two weeks' spring patrol, and it had ended in battle —the first proof of his theory. But what did the high blue at Department Headquarters care for theories? His Intelligence report no doubt already was gathering dust in some file—dust like that now gritting his eyes.

And here came more dust in a speeding plume from east of the fort whose pointed log stockade, visible as a blur for a long while, at last was coming into clear focus. Two riders were crossing the desert at an angle that would take them into Mason's column, and one rode twenty yards ahead of the other. Officer and orderly, he could tell.

As they came on he could make out the lank, knob-shouldered figure of First Sergeant Fifer taking the dust of the leading rider. No officer in the fort would ever call out the first sergeant of G Company, Mason's own, to ride orderly and he couldn't identify the slim figure in the lead as that of any officer he knew. In his Intelligence report Mason had stressed the need for trained replacements, both of officers and men. But what kind of a replacement was this?

He groaned as the horsemen dipped down into a dry wash and came up over its lip not fifty yards away. The leading horseman was rising and falling in leather, posting instead of sitting to save a sore bottom. Another second lieutenant fresh from West Point! Pulling his brand-new rank, with a gleaming yellow cavalry scarf over his face and a gleaming new campaign hat crammed far too low over his head. Only the young blue eyes showed as the boyish officer swung in ten yards away, and his gauntleted hand raised for the salute.

Mechanically Mason's hand went up with the old West Point snap as he stifled an exclamation. Another fledgling to be wet-nursed when Clawfist was out. The exclamation on the tip of his tongue changed to a muttered curse as the lieutenant's salute never even reached the brim of his hat, but turned off into a cheerful wave.

"Hello, sir," said a clear youthful voice.

Mason's nerves went raw. The rasp of rank crept into his own tone. "Where did you learn to salute, Lieutenant?"

A sudden flush crimsoned the boyish forehead. The shavetail's hand went up again and this time the salute was perfect. The blue eyes widened as they took in the battered detail with its wounded, and the blanketed load on the horse that dripped scarlet.

"In action, sir?"

Again Mason's lacerated nerves went haywire. The hammering of the afternoon desert heat, the strain of battle and exhaustion, the calling up of all his reserve strength to make it back to the fort—all combined to whip his overtaxed system, and now this dapper silly fool topped it off!

"D'you think we've been to a picnic, Lieutenant? Are you from the Navy? We've been in action all right, and what you see in the blanket is what's left of a woman."

"Y-yes, Captain." Shock swept the shavetail's eyes and they were averted from the crimson load.

"Great Christopher!" exploded Mason. "Can't you even tell a lieutenant's bars from a captain's?" He couldn't stand the sight of this useless replacement any longer. "Kindly gallop ahead on that fresh horse of yours, Lieutenant, and tell Dr. Fields to be ready for three casualties. Also tell the Officer of the Day we have a prisoner for the guardhouse."

THE young second lieutenant swung his horse around. It was a private mount, one of the most magnificent roans Mason had ever seen.

"And sit down when you ride in that saddle. We don't post like jumping-jacks out here."

Again the flush flooded the small space

of forehead between the lieutenant's hat and his handkerchief mask. His blue eyes darkened, then flashed furiously at the final rebuke. The boy was raw, but he had spirit. Mason had kept his voice low, the detail hadn't heard the bawling-out, but it had hurt the shavetail in his pride.

He had the look of being a handsome spoiled youth, and his mount certainly told of plenty of money aside from a second lieutenant's pay. Mason had had a feud

ALVIN MASON
and
LESLIE

with a young man like that once, and it had ended in the bitterest, fiercest fight in West Point's history. They hadn't called him Bullhead Mason in those days for nothing.

"Get going, Lieutenant," he ordered sharply.

"Yes, sir."

Spurs touched deep into the roan's flanks and the new shavetail was off, riding solidly and well. First Sergeant Fifer went past, with a grin that looked six inches wide on his saddle-colored, hatchet face. He looked as though he actually liked the job of being hauled out by a boy wonder to ride orderly.

"Plenty changes at the fort, sir," he called out to Mason as he pounded by.

Now the stockade loomed only half a mile away, and Mason signaled his tired detail on with a wave. The horses, smelling their stables, threw up their heads and jerked at reins.

At the south gate stocky Lieutenant Bellamy, Officer of the Day, waited with two armed troopers of the guard. In his face was curiosity, mixed with excitement. The same excitement ran in the crowd of unattached troopers pressing across the parade ground as the patrol came in. Buckets were dropped, hay forks were poised in air, the fatigue details nearby also were looking and listening.

"Torque, Clawfist's brother, Lieutenant Bellamy," Mason said wearily. "Lock him up good." He nodded to Torque's guard. "Turn him over, Sergeant Fawkes, then take the detail. Get the casualties into the hospital immediately." He urged his mount into a trot across the baked parade ground for Headquarters.

The sun glare cast shimmers off the adobe and frame buildings, and in the breathless heat the colors drooped at the top of the flagstaff. Here, Mason thought, was a post, scorched and quiescent, waiting to be waked by the word he brought, and every trooper in it would spring into swift action at that word.

As he dismounted at the splintered porch of Headquarters and draped his saddle-bags over his arm, the crackle of carbine fire drifted to him from the shooting range in the north. Any day now that practice fire would become savage volleys aimed at screeching, copper-brown targets.

He took the salute of the grizzled sergeant-major in the outer office, swinging in a fast stride for Colonel Church's inner room where, through the open door, he could see a figure in blue at the window. The desert grit was still in his eyes, blurring them as he halted, boot heels clicking, and saluted.

The old Army sentence fell from his cracked lips. "Lieutenant Mason, sir, reporting back from patrol."

He blinked and in the seconds it took to clear his eyes the tall, magnificently built officer at the window turned. There he stood with his captain's insignia new on his shoulders—hard-muscled, bronzed,

alert, and with a face that would have been incredibly handsome had it not been for the broken twist to the bridge of the aquiline nose.

Marred for life, just as Mason with the thick ridge of scar tissue over one eye was marred for life as far as looks went. In the same fight back of the stables the night after Graduation Day at West Point ten years ago.

"Hello, Bullhead! Bull-headed as ever?"

"Handsome Randy Reed! The general's boy!"

INSTINCTIVELY the old nicknames had sprung from their lips, and the old insults with them. Reed was standing ten feet from Mason, poised in the background of a pine-walled, sun-baked frontier Headquarters office, but suddenly the years fell away and they were back again in the flickering light of the stable lanterns, surrounded by a ring of cadets just made officers, toe to toe, smashing and pounding at each other.

Again the blood from his cut forehead seemed to be blinding Mason. Once more he could see Handsome Randy Reed's crimson ruin of a nose, he could feel Reed's fists cruelly driving into his ribs, could feel his own blows landing equally savagely on flesh. Pain didn't exist; only the mad rage of men trying to fell each other. A grudge fight still talked about in the ivied graystone buildings up the Hudson. No rounds, no rest, it had been a fight to the finish.

Once more Mason could feel his uppercut land full on Reed's chin, and in the same second feel Reed's terrific swing explode again his head. Double knockout it had been, they had stretched side by side, senseless—shortish, square-faced Bullhead Mason, son of a struggling upstate New York farmer, and Handsome Randolph Reed, son of Major General Burton Reed, brilliant and born to rise to gold braid, with every influence he had behind him.

They had been bound to meet again sometime. The cavalry was too small a service for their trails never to cross.

"How'd you get here, Reed?" asked Mason.

"I was transferred down from the Sioux country to Department Headquarters six weeks ago as Intelligence Officer. Went up to captain, and was moved here just after you started your patrol. Executive officer for Fort Williams, Intelligence Officer, and captain of G Company."

CHAPTER II

West Point Feud

SHOCK stiffened every fiber in Mason. G Company was his own, he had come to know every trooper in it through years of heat and thirst and battle and boredom from gaunt, fortyish First Sergeant Fifer to two-headed young Schultz, the latest month-old recruit. He had lived, slept, worked, fought with them until they had become a welded, desperate fighting unit of which he was the brain.

Now this general's son was stepping in to take over its command, and he would serve as his subordinate officer. Handsome Randy Reed, who could master a book problem in minutes that took himself and others an hour. Handsome Randy, top honor man of their class, whose looks no girl could resist, the darling of the West Point hops, of the summer resorts on furlough, with his mother's money and his father's rank behind him.

"I'll be double damned if I'll serve under him!"

"You don't have to serve under me," said Reed.

His eyes suddenly glittered. His hand clenched. They'd never shaken hands after that fight, it came to Mason. He read the expression in Reed's marred face. Yes, it was still there with both of them, the old overmastering rage, gone cold and hard as steel with the years. He'd spoken his thought aloud without realizing it.

"Don't have to serve under you?" repeated Mason.

"No. And I'll tell you why. As Intelligence Officer at Department Headquarters that report of yours on Clawfist came to me. It came through as written by you, Mason, with Colonel Church noting that it was so exceptional he meant to add nothing to it except to tie up a loose end or so in a covering page. He seems to be a colonel who gives absolute credit to the officers under his command.

"Mason, besides being a bullhead who crashes headlong into everything, you seem to have developed into one hell of a fine Intelligence Officer. I took that report of yours right in to Brigadier General Tyler, Commanding General of the Southwest Department, who is an old friend of my father's, and recommended it be forwarded to Washington as a practically perfect analysis of the Apache war mentality and methods, and an excellent prediction of an outbreak by Clawfist this spring. Also I recommended your transfer with promotion to Washington Intelligence where your new talents would be of tremendous value."

"You dirty dog, you stole my troop! You used your father's influence to sidetrack me!"

"I didn't steal your troop, Bullhead. I used whatever pull I had to try to get you promoted."

"You damned liar!"

"Stop it, Mason!" In Reed's voice was an accent of command! "We'll drop personalities. We seem to have waked up an old fight before attending to fort business. I'm in charge of Headquarters in the Colonel's absence. Who's your Injun prisoner? What's your report?"

Mason's teeth clenched. "I'll save that for Colonel Church."

It was unbearable to accept as his superior this wire-pulling officer who had ditched his combat career, and who technically was correct in his stand. He gestured toward the documents on the desk, neatly stacked for reading and obviously just in.

"Go ahead with the Colonel's paper work, Captain Handsome Randy Reed. I suppose you open his private mail?"

Reed's eyes flared. "That's enough, Lieutenant Mason!"

"Is it? It's easy enough to swipe a lieutenant's troop, but you may find it harder to swipe a colonel's job."

Reed's right fist hardened into a ball, and so did Mason's. In another instant would they be at each other again? Mason hoped so. One more taunt might start it off. He'd try it.

"And I suppose you're responsible for transferring here that mamma's boy shavetail I met just outside the fort and bawled out? It'll take a year to train that rookie lieutenant into anything, and Clawfist is out already!"

"Yes," said the shavetail's boyish voice from the doorway behind Mason, "he's responsible."

MASON turned around. She was silm, she was honey-haired, she was grace and firm young strength in every line of her aristocratic figure, enhanced by a light-colored print. She was the loveliest picture Mason had ever seen.

He realized now that the deep blue eyes with their long lashes and the intelligent forehead had been all that had showed above her dust-caked cavalry scarf out there on the desert. The new shavetail at Fort Williams had been this glowing girl!

"Lieutenant Mason, an old classmate of mine at the Point, Leslie," Reed said in a controlled voice. "My sister, Lieutenant."

Somehow Mason drew himself up and managed the West Point bow, the height of drilled decorum. Leslie Reed's level gaze swept from his scar-tissued, square-jawed face with the rugged lines his dust mask no longer hid to the remnant of her brother's good looks that Mason's fists had ruined.

He had never known Reed had a sister. She was years younger, too young ten years ago to have been anything but a schoolgirl in pigtails worshiping her hero older brother. All younger sisters did, glamorizing them. And he had smashed the glamor out of Handsome Randy Reed who hated him for it still. This girl, he

knew, would hate him even more for wrecking her brother's face. She'd hate him all her life.

"May I apologize, Miss Reed, for my discourteous words to you out there on the desert?" Mason was making his apology in a stiff voice that seemed to have only a note of perfunctory duty in it. "Naturally I didn't realize—"

"There's no reason you should have known I was riding in the blouse which Second Lieutenant Wilkinson—he's new here, too—insisted on lending me. I always use Army kit riding. And First Sergeant Fifer of G insisted on riding orderly."

Both would insist, reflected Mason. Everybody would insist on doing everything for Leslie Reed. The General's daughter would have a pull around any post she graced, just as Handsome Randy Reed had the pull of the General's son. As a team they would be unbeatable.

He tried to say something and his dust-caked throat was too dry for speech. His nerves were still raw, his stomach stretched drumlike, for reaction from battle still claimed him.

"Afraid I'm not a great success as a shavetail, Mr. Mason," Leslie Reed said. "Let's forget it." She shrugged with well-bred casualness.

Mason felt that he had been thoroughly inspected and dismissed. This vivid and lovely general's daughter would be worshiped by every young officer and enlisted man on the post. Except himself. Leslie Reed, he felt instinctively, was going to be worse poison to him than Handsome Randy.

"Ah—er—" he fumbled.

A slim hand brushed words aside as unimportant. "Any mail for me, Randy? I passed the mail wagon coming in from my ride."

Reed lifted a lavender envelope with a flourishing handwritten address from the desk top.

"Clarice's purple scrawl." Leslie smiled. "All the Washington gossip fresh from Mrs. Major Barker. I'll have to give you a letter of introduction to her, Lieutenant. She'll steer you through the social pitfalls and get you a moneyed bride, Lieutenant Mason. Teapot intrigues and tempests are her lifeblood."

"I'm not going to Washington!" exploded Mason.

"No?" she said evenly. "Second Lieutenant Hunt has gone up to first in G, and Mr. Wilkinson has been posted as its new second. There have been changes since you went on patrol."

There had been, wide and deep and damnable. Sergeant Fifer had thrown the warning to him. There was no place in G Company for the man who had been its leader up until now, for Bullhead Mason, who had forged and tempered it into cold steel. He had been licked by a general's son and now a general's daughter was rubbing it in.

He choked down the hot words that sprang to his lips as the challenge of the gate sentry traveled the parade ground. Through the gate B and D Companies were coming back from carbine practice at the range, and Mason could see the wide-shouldered, long-forked figure of Colonel Church swinging his Irish hunter into the spot were Bellamy was saluting.

MASON knew why Bellamy had stopped the Colonel. He was reporting Torque as a prisoner. Colonel Church looked instantly toward Headquarters, barked an order behind him and threw his mount into a fast trot. Colonel Church never let the grass grow under his horse's hoofs when any Indians were out.

"This is no place for me with the Colonel coming with that look on his face," said Leslie lightly. "I'll go curl up with a fan and Clarice's letter."

She waved and was gone. Colonel Church swung off his horse and his fast strides sounded almost immediately. He swung into the office, snapping back Mason's and Reed's salutes in motion. Under his graying mustache his mouth was a thin line, his sun-bronzed face hard. He was talking before he reached the desk.

"Bellamy tells me you got Torque, Lieu-

tenant Mason. Excellent. Just a brief outline first, please."

Mason reported briefly and quickly. "Late in the afternoon yesterday, last day of patrol, we sighted smoke along the mountain wall beyond Mule Pass. We headed for it and found fifteen Apaches around the burned wreckage of two wagons with what they'd left of three new settlers. They ran hell-for-leather, taking a white woman they'd captured along with them. We chased them in a running fight all night and rode them down finally in a box canyon. We got all but two and captured Torque, their leader. They killed the woman as we closed in. It means that Clawfist is out, I think, sir."

"So do I." Colonel Church tossed a thin manila envelope that protruded from the upper pocket of his tunic onto the desk. "And we'll be ready for him. It's all in this dispatch I read at the range."

"It was stamped 'Rush,' sir," said Reed. "I didn't delay to open it, but pushed it straight to you by rider."

"Good judgment, Reed. Department Headquarters notifies me that they are sending two infantry companies and an extra cavalry troop to Fort Williams at once. The walk-a-heaps will act as garrison, giving us a full squadron of cavalry to take the field against Clawfist. But there's a puzzling angle in here. Department has a verified report that one hundred of Clawfist's hitherto irreconcilable braves turned themselves in to the reservation two weeks ago, half-starved and apparently submissive at last. Department figures a single good show of force can make the rest, maybe Clawfist himself, come in and we can finally wrap up this endless Border war."

"I think that would be it, sir," said Reed. "In Department Intelligence we estimated Clawfist's strength in the spring at around three hundred. That would mean he's lost one-third of them to the reservation. This settler killing by Torque may be the independent action of a blood-mad subchief. It may have been actuated by vindictive weakness and not strength."

"It was actuated by the knowledge that not only Clawfist hasn't lost a single brave to the reservation, but that he's going to gain about five hundred reinforcements with which to let loose the worst massacres the Border has ever seen!" The words seemed to break of their own force from Mason.

"What's that?" asked Colonel Church sharply, his keen gaze leveled at Mason.

"Look at these I brought back."

Mason lifted the saddle-bags he had pitched onto a wall chair, and spilled their contents on the desk. There they lay, eight gaily-beaded Apache headbands, two of them soaked with blood.

"Headbands off the Apaches we got. Those are the kind of headbands the trader's post sells to the Apaches at the reservation. Half the killers of those settlers came off the reservation, Colonel!"

CHAPTER III

Change of Command

THINGS that Mason had been groping for were clear now. The fragments of the Intelligence puzzle he had been mulling over were fitting together to make the full picture.

For a moment the two men before him were silent, then Colonel Church urged:

"Go on, Mr. Mason."

"Those hundred fighting bucks didn't go in to the reservation to surrender and eat beef," Mason said grimly. "They went in to stir up the hundreds of other fighting-age Apaches and get them to break out and join Clawfist. They're secret agents of Clawfist, that's what. Those headbanded Apaches we struck were some of Clawfist's spies, returning to bring word that the whole reservation is going to rise. So Torque hit the first caravan he found, with them to open the war. He didn't feel like waiting."

For a long moment Colonel Church stared at Mason, his eyes clouded with concentration.

"Mason," he said then, "I'm putting this on the wire to Department immediately."

Mason pointed to the window. "Here comes Department now, Colonel, or I miss another guess."

Kicking up whorls of dust, a long-legged corporal was running fast toward Headquarters from the adobe Signals shack. A field telegraph form showed yellow in his hand. He clattered across the outer office and into the room, saluted, and held the message out to Colonel Church.

"Just in, sir. Rush."

Colonel Church read the form at a glance.

"You hit it on the nose, Mason," he said quietly. "Corporal Gates, tell the Headquarters bugler outside to sound Officers' Call instantly."

"Yes, sir."

The corporal darted out and in moments the brassy notes of the bugle tore the stillness.

"Here it is, gentlemen," said Colonel Church and read aloud:

> Indian agent wires whole reservation shows signs of rising with war dances now going on. Infantry guard insufficient and not mobile. Entrain two troops from fort for reservation immediately, yourself commanding, and put down threatened breakout. Use your own judgment at reservation, you are in full authority as ranking officer on spot. Infantry entraining at base to replace cavalry as garrison at fort.
>
> Charles Tyler
> Brigadier General
> Commanding Department
> of Southwest

Silence, pregnant with tension, fell in the sun-washed room. The only sound was the droning of horseflies on the ceiling. Then Colonel Church spoke.

"B and D Companies go. They're up to strength. G Company isn't. It stays to garrison the post. This order means stripping the fort to a skeleton defense until the infantry gets here twenty-four hours from now, but that's Department's judgment and it's mine. A single swift stroke of prevention can stall off a whole desert war. The reservation is the point of immediate danger now, not the Border."

"It can change," Mason said grimly.

"It's a risk that has to be run."

Church paused, face dark with thought. Every possibility, every chance, Mason knew, was being evaluated. Here was a cavalry leader who believed in fast action. If he reached the reservation in time he'd bottle up the war-dancing killers. If he didn't—

Was the massacre of the white woman and her menfolk going to be multiplied scores, even hundreds of times, along the Border as Clawfist burned and killed, with a copper-skinned army at his back?

"Captain Reed," said the Colonel. "I'm turning the staff work of entrainment over to you."

REED was writing on forms at a table next to the wall. "It's done, sir. I know the transportation situation at railhead, Colonel. Last week I went over it thoroughly with the station master, as falling under my exec's job. I have the wire here to him to roll out cattle cars from the sidings for B's and D's horses, and flatcars for the troopers and their equipment. There's always one engine at the livestock pens, and I've commandeered the switch engine also to run the train under double head. MacTavish, the station master, is a good man. He'll have the train ready for us with steam up before we get there. Load and blow the whistle with a clear track ahead, that's all."

"Good! We'll leave here pronto. The troops will travel on emergency rations. We should reach the reservation by dawn."

"Before that, with two engines pulling. Emergency rations can be held back, Colonel." Reed lifted the form. "This second wire is to Quartermaster Sergeant Murtagh at our railhead supply depot. It authorizes him to sign for boilers of beans, filled with all the pork the Boston Restaurant across from the station can dig up, and to load them on flat cars, red-hot. I've talked that one over with Old Man Curry who owns the Boston. He says he can fill an emergency order for every trooper in this fort inside an hour. He's an old Union Army cook, knows troops fight best on full

bellies. Wire Number Three notifies the Indian agent and the infantry commander at the reservation when the cavalry should arrive.

"Excellent, Reed." Colonel Church commended heartily.

"Then one to Department Headquarters—"

"I'll write that one myself. I hear the officers outside. Just step out and tell them what's afoot. I'll be there in a moment or so."

"Yes, sir."

With fast steps Reed went by Mason. Handsome Randy Reed, the cadet wonder, who mastered the book in minutes. Captain Randolph Reed, now of G Company, exec for the fort, who solved the problem of entrainment with a flick of the hand.

Mason had to admit he had been looking on the work of a born staff officer, incredibly swift and far-seeing. Handsome Randy knew how to get troops to the scene of action fast and send them into it with full bellies to fight on, which could be half the battle.

Mason turned toward the desk where Colonel Church was just signing his telegram.

"Do I go on the reservation action with B or D, sir? Since Captain Reed has been posted to G, and Hunt has gone to first lieutenant, with a new second assigned, I seem to be a supernumerary officer."

"You don't go on the reservation action, Mason—you go to Washington," Colonel Church said crisply. "There were other papers in that Department 'Rush' envelope beside the dispatch I told you about. One is an order transferring you to Washington Intelligence as a captain as of yesterday's date, with orders to report there at the end of a thirty-day furlough. You've got your step, Mason. Congratulations."

"Captain in Washington Intelligence?"

"Exactly. Brigadier General Tyler has given you the push up on that report of yours, and you're out of the Border rut. I'm sorry to lose a more than valuable officer here but you've earned the promotion. They want to develop our Intelligence section more fully. There's gold braid at last that looks to the future. You can go higher than captain in Washington quickly, Mason. Maybe to major before you're two years older."

"Major Mason," Mason said bitterly. "Clapping his spurs into the sides of his desk and galloping off in all directions, waving a quill pen."

"You'll come back to combat. Your kind always does."

"In about twenty years."

"Damn it, Mason, do you want to rot out ten or fifteen years between promotions in dusty, idle frontier posts? Or do you want to be in there advancing and working for the Army's future? You're lucky you got the push from General Tyler."

GENERAL TYLER? It was Handsome Randy Reed, the man he detested, who had put the push in behind Mason, and he'd done it to swipe his job. Randy was smart enough to make it look like his superior's work; he was smart enough to smile when he told Mason what he'd done.

"I'd hoped for the captaincy of G, sir. I'd hoped the capture of Torque—"

"This new job is even better, Mason, you'll find. I sensed something was in the offing for you when Reed was posted here to take over G. I've never mentioned it, but don't think I haven't heard of the bad blood between Bullhead Mason and Handsome Randy Reed. Your set-to is a part of West Point cadet history, and West Point history gets around. I had a grudge fight out back of those stables myself, Mason, a good many years ago. Tell me, did you two shake hands and wipe it out? Or does that bad blood between you still exist?"

Mason said nothing.

"I see. It still exists, so perhaps it's as well you're going to Washington. The morale of this post could go to hell completely with you two in it battling each other. You and Reed are two totally different types of officers, Mason. You're all combat experience, with a flair on the side

for Intelligence, and he's all Intelligence and staff with a dash of combat on the side. His combat record up North was short but creditable. There's some kind of rumor around that he really did something. But there are always rumors about a general's son. You've seen a bit of his staff work. Reed is the best executive officer this post has ever had."

"Yes, sir," Mason said sourly.

"Be as bull-headed as you please, Mason." Colonel Church smiled. "You'll be under Reed's command only overnight. I suppose you'll start your furlough tomorrow morning? Got a place to go?"

"Plenty."

No near living relatives, the old farm sold years ago. Mason's eyes strayed out to the parade ground, where the dust whorls spun in the glare. His ears caught the stamping of cavalry horses in the stables, the clang of the farrier's hammer on anvil and the excited, small noises that told him the troops knew action was up. His nose smelled leather and men's sweat.

This was his home, Fort Williams and G Company, the only home he had known since he had come out a raw, wet-eared shavetail from the Point. And Reed had thrown him out of it.

"Captain Reed!" Church's voice went up.

"Coming, sir," rose the confident answer. Reed swung into the room. "All briefed, sir. B and D set to go the instant Boots and Saddles sounds, and Captains Castleman and Hillier report. As fort exec I've been holding daily inspections and check-ups, filling in requisitions on equipment for ten days now. You'll lead a force out the gate that won't have a shoe or a shell missing."

"Good! Captain Reed, the fort is yours. I'm turning its command over to you. Mason goes on furlough tomorrow, he's been promoted to Washington Intelligence as a captain. It's in those papers."

"Congratulations, Captain Mason," said Handsome Randy Reed easily. "Glad to hear it."

Mason glared at him. More sham, more polite pretense, from the man who'd engineered a dirty job behind his back.

"Torque's in your charge, Reed as prisoner. Get what information from him you can."

The Devil's

He rode across the mesa singing "Yipee! Let 'er buck!
The Devil's own children have the Devil's own luck.
My mother was a gipsy, the Devil was my sire—"
Then he hollered for the Top-hand and said he was for hire.
The Top-hand hired him pronto, and set him riding herd.
He cleaned us out at poker; he was sure a lucky bird!
He went to town to spend it and was held up on the way,
But drew a mite the quicker, so he finished out the day.

Some gamblers heard about him and they got him in a game.
The song he kept a-singing as he played was just the same.
He'd take the cards and shuffle them to "Yipee! Let 'er buck!
The Devil's own children have the Devil's own luck.
The Devil was my father, and a gipsy was my maw—"
And it wasn't just at shootin' he was quicker on the draw.
They were set to make the killing and he bet his every dime
On the showdown, saying "Gents, I reckon I can win this time!"
Then his gun appeared in one hand as he dropped a royal flush,
And on those startled gamblers fell a mighty sudden hush.

"I'll question him until his teeth rattle."

Mason's glare grew harder. "No Apache's teeth ever rattle."

At the door Colonel Church turned.

"I have no further orders for you, Captain Reed, or for you, Captain Mason. But I have a request for you both. You're still young men, you have many years ahead of you in the Army. You may easily meet again and have to work together at higher ranks. Shake hands and call off that old feud."

He went out.

CHAPTER IV

The General's Daughter

OUTSIDE, Colonel Church's voice was raised in orders to the officers. The blare of Boots and Saddles crashed across the post and turned its quiet into a medley of shouts and running feet. The troops were going out, and Mason wasn't going with them. Maybe he would never ride with troops again.

"Well, Bullhead?"

Handsome Randy Reed stood behind the Colonel's desk, the CO of the post. His hands rested lightly on its top. He did not move. Mason did. He thrust his hands behind him and locked them into tight fists.

"It'll take more than a colonel's request to make me love you, Reed," Mason said.

Reed went red under his tan and his broken nose twisted to one side.

"Bullhead, I'm CO of this post. You get the hell off it the first thing in the morning. That's no request. That's a direct order."

From the corner of his eye Mason caught a flash of color up the parade ground and turned a little to look out the window that gave to the north. Vivid and graceful, Leslie Reed was moving onto the porch of an Officers' Row cottage to watch the troops go out. Handsome Randy Reed hated his guts, Mason thought, and so did Leslie. A mounting rage against both of them filled him.

"I'll go, Handsome Randy," he said thickly. "I never thought it'd be a pleasure to obey an order of yours before."

He went to his quarters but, tired as he was, he could not sleep. He was restless,

Own Luck

He raked in all the money, singing "Gentlemen, you're stuck!
For the Devil's own children have the Devil's own luck."

And then he met a waitress who was easy on the eyes;
She certainly was lovely and was just the proper size,
So he took her to the city and they had a wondrous time,
Till his wallet was plumb empty, and he hadn't got a dime.
But he just shrugged his shoulders, singing "Yipee! Let 'er buck!"
For I'm the Devil's offspring, and I have the Devil's luck!"

He took her to a classy joint to get a bite and sup,
And when he went to pay the check, he hollered "Stick 'em up!"
He reached to clean the till out, but clean forgot one thing,
And everywhere around him noisy bells began to ring.
He shot and killed a policeman as he tried to get away,
And I understand they hung him on a warm and sunny day,
And just for half a moment, while the hangman's slipknot stuck,
They heard his voice a-gurgling: "—the Devil's own luck!"

—Alfred I. Tooke

resentful, dreading what lay ahead of him before his last preparations for his departure were made, but which must be done.

It was getting late when at last he swarmed up the last few rungs of the ladder and swung himself off onto the firing platform by the south gate.

He felt dull, emotionally drained. The last haunting notes of *Taps* were drifting across the moonlit, deserted parade ground and he had no idea when he would hear them again at an Army post.

It hadn't been easy, that visit to G Company's lanternlit barracks just half an hour ago, to say good-by to the men he had led through desert heat and battle. Hard men, weathered men, loyal men. They hadn't said much beyond "Luck to you, Captain," and "Sorry to see the Captain go," but there had been a world of emotion behind the few words of permanent farewell. Their callused handclasps had been so strong his hand still was feeling sore from them.

Now it was over, the last link with G had been broken, and he wanted some of the desert night breeze to take the heat and fury out of his system.

He went on along the palisades to the corner jut of the watchtower, where he halted and looked over the waste of sand and cactus that stretched to the Border. Out there, he knew, twenty miles away in the night, Clawfist's tireless brain was working, plotting fire and mutilation.

Wholesale war again! And until the head of the doughboys' column marched through the gate, Fort Williams here was a stripped and helpless post with not more than fifty troopers and its small Gatling crews to defend it and its women and children. But Clawfist couldn't know that two of its troops had galloped out to stop his war.

Still tension rode Mason. He drew his cigar case from his tunic pocket and sat down on the platform with his back against the pointed log stockade. He got the cigar going and closed his eyes, drawing in the soothing smoke. His breath came easier, his jangled nerves felt relaxed. Here on the desert in the moon-drenched night with myriad stars crowding low in the blue-black vault a man sometimes could know an incredible peace.

"Forget Clawfist," he muttered. "Forget the General's son. Forget the General's daughter."

The peace broke with a snap. A woman's clear voice cut into it, and through the swirling smoke he saw her, as light as gossamer and as lovely, standing before him in white. He hadn't heard her come up the ladder by the watchtower.

"Dreaming, Captain Mason?"

"Ah—er—you—"

FROM the bosom of her dress Leslie Reed drew a square letter.

"Did I hear you say something about 'Forget the General's daughter' in your sleep? The General's daughter didn't forget you, Captain Mason. I sent an orderly to your quarters and First Sergeant Fifer, who'd just finished packing your things, told him you'd headed up here for some air. So I came along with this letter of introduction to Clarice Barker in Washington. She'll take care of you, as I said."

The light-hearted raillery in her voice stung him to the quick.

"Thanks," he said. "But I don't think it will be at all necessary."

"Do you plan to spend your evenings leading a patrol along the Potomac or over into Virginia, Captain Mason?" She laughed, and it had a trill in it. "The shooting war along the Potomac has been over for twenty years. But the social warfare in the drawing rooms still goes on. You'll be a valuable warrior among the plush portieres with Clarice's introductions, Captain Mason. You'll like the social season in Washington. I love it myself."

She would. Surrounded by gold braid and dashing younger officers, none of them rating less than a major, Leslie Reed would go from one social triumph to another, year after year. In a matter of hours, on two meetings, she had made a terrific impact on him.

Now she was deepening and strengthening that emotion in him, and he resented her type of flawless, useless society beauty, utterly misplaced in a battle-menaced frontier post. He didn't want any favors from her, he meant to tear that letter in half. Instead he found himself fumbling it into his tunic pocket.

"How did you ever happen to come out here?" he heard his voice asking.

"A Washington winter can be pretty exhausting. You never stop going for a single night. For the last five years I've always visited Randy at his posts, to recuperate in the spring. I can get plenty of riding and picnicking, and look at something beside city blocks. You wouldn't believe it, but I was an Army brat when I was little, and Father was only a colonel. Long, long, ago that was."

Long, long ago was right. Mason could guess that even then she'd been a hopelessly spoiled little creature, well deserving the name of brat. Now she was out visiting one of those quaint, dusty old posts full of quaint, dusty soldiers like himself. But just the same she was a living, vital flame of beauty.

"Are you going to be in Washington this winter?" he asked her.

"I plan to go abroad. But Clarice can do everything for you. Dinners, receptions, dances—"

"I haven't been to a dance since the Graduation Hop at West Point. I'm not a dancing man."

"Just a fighting man?" The light tone deepened, the girl spoke seriously. "What was that fight between you and Randy about after the Graduation Hop? He's never told me anything except that you hated each other all the way through the Point, and that it came to a head at the dance."

"I—ah—er—"

Again Mason found himself fumbling for words. What *had* that fight been about? The memory had dimmed. Trying hard to call back the events of ten years ago, some of them came.

"I'd brought a red-headed girl from my home town who was crazy about handsome men," he said, "and I wasn't that. Your brother Randy took her out in the moonlight and she stayed there with him for two straight dances I was booked for on her program. At supper I happened to stumble carrying a tray of lemon sherbet and it went all over Randy's dress trousers. He had to go back to barracks for an hour to clean them off. That put the climax on things."

"And so you scarred each other for life. My brother *was* the handsomest man I've ever seen until you beat him up. For years, Captain Mason, I hated you as I've never hated any man."

"Of course," he said bitterly. "I take that for granted. And your brother still hates me. That's why he engineered my transfer in Washington, so he could get my troop."

"I helped him engineer it. I wrote Clarice Barker, who has tremendous influence among the big gold braids' wives, to push you. And don't think she didn't."

BITTER rage swept Mason. "You—you worked to shove me back to a desk in Washington? And now you want to make a drawing room tin soldier out of me with your letter to Clarice Barker? Well, you've got me back of the desk. But you'll never get me into the drawing rooms. You're a good hater, Miss Reed."

"Yes," she said, "I am."

"And here comes a better one," he said.

Down by the gate a tall figure was just lifting onto the firing platform from the ladder. Handsome Randy Reed, making an inspection of his fort's defenses, and he would be in a black mood. He'd spent an hour with Torque right after the troops had gone.

"I'll go," the girl said swiftly. "I'll leave you to him, Captain Bullhead Mason."

She was off down the ladder, and apparently Reed hadn't noticed her presence. In the moonlight as he approached Mason his forehead knotted with unpleasant thoughts, his jaw was set. Mason, sitting on his box, tried to relax. Reed stopped short when he saw him.

"Taking it easy, Mason?" he said curtly.

"Very." Mason let out a long puff from his cigar. He couldn't resist the thrust. "Torque's teeth rattle, Reed?"

"No, damn you!" grated Reed. "Not even a grunt out of him. The devil just glared as though he had a reserve card up his sleeve."

"An Apache always has something up his sleeve."

Mason let out another puff and Reed drew out a cigar himself. The snick of the match sounded loud in the night.

"Under cover, Reed, like I am," Mason advised. "This isn't Sioux country where the Injuns don't attack forts. We look out for Apaches after dark."

He rose to his feet, ready to put his hand on Reed's arm and draw it down, but the match flared, and as its flame went to the cigar Reed's face was clear in its glow.

"The mesquite, Reed! Down."

"Huh?"

Too late Mason saw the two shadowy men who came to their feet in a mesquite clump not sixty yards out, one bending a bow, the other bringing up his rifle. Reed's head, squarely between the points of the palisade was a mark no Apache would miss at that range, and Mason was feet away from him. The whoosh of the arrow shaft bridged the distance, and there was a thud in the palisade as Mason slammed hard with his open hand against the side of Reed's head.

"You damned fool, duck!" he yelled.

CHAPTER V

Torque Escapes

MASON heard the crack of the rifle and felt the vicious burn in his forearm as Reed's head jerked away under the impact of the blow.

Knocked off-balance Reed went sprawling. Face convulsed with fury, he scrambled to his feet and dived for Mason, fist swinging.

"Damn you, Bullhead! If you want a fight you get it!"

"Injuns, I told you!"

Deafened by the hard slap against his ear and blinded by rage, Reed plunged for Mason, launching a savage straight arm for his chin. Mason jumped aside and, carried forward by his impetus with nothing to check him, Reed plunged the few feet to the platform's edge and went over it, spread-eagled in air. From the ground below sounded the thud of his body.

Mason shouted, "Watchtower! Sentries! Injuns!"

He ran for the watchtower stairs and up them onto the base where the sentries stood at the Gatling. A single look along the wall of the fort was enough. The white-shirted figure that leaped from the window of the guardhouse by the gate landed on the sand on all-fours, wrenched upright, and raced with incredible speed for safety.

Torque! Torque was free! Every mesquite clump and rock within two hundred yards of the stockade seemed to spit fire as the hidden Apaches covered his race to freedom.

"Put the Gatling on him! Cut Torque down!"

The revolving barrels of the gun opened in a sheet of flame. But it was useless.

It was like trying to bring down a fly with a sledge-hammer. From along the walls the sentries snapshot and missed. Lead splashed the sand in front of and behind the moccasined feet of Torque but the target was too fleeting. All long the stockade troopers were firing and cursing, answering the darts of flame on the desert as the Indian bullets and arrows swept over the logs.

"Here come the horses, sir!"

"Give me that gun!"

Torque tore on, now more than a hundred yards in the clear, and beyond him Mason glimpsed the tight-packed body of Clawfist's riders, with an Indian out ahead of them leading a free pony. Clawfist had planned superbly, thrusting his force up into short range of the fort under cover of the cloud-rack that earlier had veiled

the moon, invisible as Apaches always were. Once on that pony Torque would be away!

Over the barrels of the Gatling he had jumped behind Mason sighted, and triggered well in advance of the storming Indians. He saw his bullets gouge sand, lifted his fire and let the Indians run into it. Half-naked bodies, hit by that devastating blast, plunged off their horses' backs and writhed on the earth. But Torque ran on, unhit, swung to his pony's back, and as Mason tried for him in a last burst he galloped into the night that swallowed him and the remnant of Clawfist's mounted attackers.

Mason was conscious that First Sergeant Fifer, stripped to his breeches, was bellowing orders from the firing platform beyond the gate, and that suddenly awakened and half-dressed troopers were streaming up the ladders, carbines in hand. The fort was in an uproar.

From behind mesquite clumps and boulders Indians jumped up and ran to where more riders with led horses could be seen. A long fusillade spouted flame along the firing platform but it, too, was useless.

"Cease firing!" yelled Mason. "They got away with it!"

His heart was a leaden thing. Only too well he knew what was coming now. Massacre!

He lifted the cavalry scarf that hung around his neck and mopped cold sweat from his forehead. Then he was going down the stairs and along the platform to the gate. Bare-footed and half-naked to the waist, Sergeant Fifer stood on the platform across the way.

"Send a detail out with a light wagon, Sergeant," said Mason. "Bring in all the Apache dead you can find, for sign."

"Yes, sir."

MASON went down the ladder and faced Second Lieutenant Wilkinson, the new replacement for G, and Officer of the Day in charge of the guardhouse. His round young face was conscience-stricken and his salute was ragged. A heavy file dangled in his left hand.

"So that's the way Torque did it?" demanded Mason harshly.

"Yes, sir. I found it on the floor of his cell. He filed through the bottom of the bars and wrenched them out by main strength. I don't know how he got—"

"I do," snapped Mason. "Clawfist sent it in to him. You don't know yet that an Apache inching himself along the sand is absolutely invisible when the moon goes dark. You haven't been out here long enough to know that the way to guard an Apache in a cell is to put a guard in with him. You've got a lot to learn, Lieutenant Wilkinson."

"Yes, sir," Wilkinson said miserably.

"So forget your first mistake and pull yourself together. There's plenty of work to be done from here on."

"Yes, sir." Wilkinson's face lightened. "Orders, sir?"

"You'll get them later on. Where's Captain Reed?"

Only now realization came to Mason that throughout the action his had been the only officer's voice raised in command. When Handsome Randy Reed had plunged off the firing platform oblivion had swallowed him up. Mason himself had given commands and directed the battle as though he had been actually in command of the post.

"I haven't seen Captain Reed, sir. Lieutenant Hunt came running out of Headquarters, headed for Watchtower Southwest where you were, and he's still over there."

Wilkinson pointed and Mason saw the huddle near the base of the tower where the ambulance stood. The sweat grew colder on his gritty body as he started at top speed for the group. Rangy and capable, Lieutenant Hunt stood at the rear step of the ambulance, turning as Mason broke in through the half-dozen troopers.

"Hunt! What goes on?"

"Oh, here you are, Captain Mason! I started for the tower when the firing broke and heard you going into action up there.

You didn't need me, so I turned to this job. I've loaded Captain Reed."

Mason swung into the ambulance. By the wavering light of a lantern held by a stout medical corporal, Dr. Fields, the civilian contract surgeon of the fort, was bending over the stretcher. Reed's polished cavalry boot and expensive yellow-striped breeches had been cut away, baring the leg that was a ghastly mass of splintered bone projecting through the flesh above the knee. Reed lay there, eyes closed, face sunken, breathing stertorously as Fields thrust the hypodermic syringe into his upper arm. The doctor drove the merciful drug home and turned as Mason's shadow loomed over him.

"He's had the devil of a fall, Mason. I've never seen a worse knee. And he may have a concussion."

Dr. Fields spoke directly. He was too hardened by the bitter school of Army post casualties to minimize or exaggerate. He was reliable to the core; he told the truth, whether good or bad. He had gone gray of beard, and stoop-shouldered taking care of the Army.

"Out of action, Doctor?"

"For a month at least. Longer maybe." The doctor bent down.

The lines of pain in Reed's face had gone, for the morphine had taken over. In the lanternlight his face suddenly seemed years younger, and shadows wiped out the twist in the nose. He was Handsome Randy Reed, the super-brilliant West Point honor man again, unmarred, incredibly good-looking.

The doctor straightened. "That's all I can do for the present, Mason. I'll ride to the hospital beside the driver. I can do with a cigar. Come along, Corporal."

The doctor dropped to the ground with his medico, passing Lieutenant Hunt who had climbed onto the step.

"Any orders, sir?" Hunt asked Mason.

THEY were exactly the words young Lieutenant Wilkinson had used at the gate, looking to Mason for command. And he was a supernumerary officer transferred to Washington Intelligence, with no authority to give an order in Fort Williams!

"You're the post C.O., Hunt. I'm detached. With Captain Reed out, you take over the fort by regulations."

"Damn regulations!" exclaimed Hunt. "If you want regulations you're the ranking officer here right now. You're a combat captain and you're back with G Company as far as I'm concerned. We want you to take the fort. I want you back, the men I'm sure want you back."

Behind Hunt in the lantern's glow the faces of the troopers were hard-bitten and grinning.

"C'mon back, Cap'n." A scar-cheeked private rolled his quid of tobacco and spat on the ground. Mason knew him—a guardhouse character, and a desperate fighting man. "I speaks for all."

"I don't think I should—"

"Take the fort, Captain Mason," said a clear, coldly furious voice from behind him. "No matter how you made the chance for yourself, take the fort."

Mason swept around. The blocky form of the medico holding the lantern over Reed had hidden Leslie Reed, waiting back at the end of the ambulance.

"Miss Reed!"

"Helping the doctor. After all, the commanding officer you knocked off the platform happens to be my brother."

"Knocked off the platform?" echoed Mason.

The ambulance gave a jolt and started forward.

"My dress caught in the bottom of the ladder," she called. "It took me a minute or so to get it free. So I heard you call Randy a damned fool and I heard your fist go into him and his challenge to fight. Then he came hurtling off the platform onto the ground, and you stepped into his shoes."

Mason stood silent in shock. He felt a trickle running down the fingers of his right hand and looked down at the blood that had dripped from the bullet graze on his forearm. That forearm had been where Randy Reed's head showed be-

tween the stockade points, it had taken the bullet that would have drilled Handsome Randy clean. He pulled the arm quickly behind his back, out of sight.

"You can't hope to deny it?" she said challengingly.

"No," he said.

The ambulance had increased pace, the mules were trotting. What was the use of trying to convince this girl who had hated him for years? In the glow of the lantern rocking on the floor her lovely face was rigid with emotion. For a moment the only sound was the heavy breathing of Reed, unconscious on the stretcher.

"So now what, Captain Mason?"

Mason moved onto the rear step of the ambulance. It was just passing the Headquarters building and in there was plenty of work to do, swift and desperate work.

"So now," he said, "Clawfist and a couple of hundred Apaches at least will attack the fort. And they'll overrun it."

His heels hit earth hard as he jumped off the step and headed for Headquarters. Hunt had followed the ambulance at a run. He pounded onto the porch directly behind Mason.

"Tough spot, isn't it, Mason?"

"None tougher. If Clawfist is out there on the desert, as I think he is, Torque will reach him in no time. Torque saw the two full troops with Colonel Church at their head gallop past his cell window, he knows he've got a garrison of only fifty troopers left. As soon as Clawfist knows it I don't think he'll waste any time attacking. I know how Clawfist's mind works. So do you."

"He'll attack. Any plans? Fort up inside in one of the buildings?"

"Fire arrows will take care of any buildings. Want to choose between roasting, or running out to be shot down? We've got women and children, at least thirty of 'em to protect, damn it!"

"Let the fort go and make an immediate run for it to railhead?"

"And let Clawfist burn the fort without a fight? Every Apache between here and the Rio Grande would join him. It'd take a year to establish another base. We're supposed to fight for our forts, Hunt!"

CHAPTER VI

The Masquerade

HOOVES clattered and axles creaked and the wagon with the detail of troopers drew abreast of Headquarters building and halted, its pile of bodies partially visible over the sideboards. Still shoeless and half-naked, Sergeant Fifer led a motley squad of similarly undressed troopers clad, as the Apache attack had caught them, some only in their shirts, and all riding barebacked horses. They looked as wild as the Apaches they had brought in.

"Lay them out, Sergeant," said Mason. "I'll try for sign."

The unloaded bodies, torn by Gatling fire, were stretched on the hard earth, and by lanternlight Mason scrutinized each one. Two of them were clad in bloodied tunics, the others were stripped and breech-clouted. He rose from his inspection, frowning.

"These two shirts are new. Their wearers are just off the reservation and they're from another tribe. The others are Clawfist's fighters. I'd read it the reservation bucks are beginning to stream in to Clawfist already, and that he used some on the party he sent to rescue Torque when those two Apaches who got away told him of the capture. That means he'll wait the night out to get as many reinforcements as possible. It should probably give us until dawn at least."

He stood up, his mind racing to avert disaster and finding nothing.

"These dead ones all, Sergeant? No wounded Apaches to bring in?"

"These two was wounded, sir." Fifer jerked his thumb toward two bodies. "You savvy wounded Apaches. They tried the old rattlesnake act but the boys was faster on the trigger. You got to fight fire with

fire, Apaches like Apaches."

"Right, Sergeant."

Fight fire with fire. Fight Apaches like Apaches? The sudden thought exploded in Mason's brain. These hard-bitten soldiers, burned copper-brown by the desert sun could splotch their faces and bodies with war paint, and with headbands and manes no one could tell at a distance that they weren't Apaches.

He knew the look on his face was startled. Lieutenant Hunt saw it.

"You've got a plan, Captain Mason?" Eagerness and hope sprang into the lieutenant's eyes.

"A plan?" Bit by bit, in perfect order, the pieces were forming into a pattern in Mason's mind. Everything he needed was in the fort trader's post or in the quartermaster's supplies. "Let's say I have a vision, Hunt. A vision of what today's dawn will see. This whole fort blazing to the skies, abandoned to the enemy. G Company with the fort's women and children and sick in the wagons making a desperate stand out yonder near Rattlesnake Ridge, ringed around by Clawfist's reinforcements pouring down from the reservation to the north. And Clawfist coming up with his entire crew from the Border to the south to attack. That's what my vision is, Hunt."

"And it's hell, sir."

A grim smile cut Mason's tired face. "You're right it's hell, Hunt. On Clawfist, I hope. . . ."

Ahead of Mason axles creaked and the shapes of tilt-covered wagons loomed blackly in the last minutes of the night as the column of vehicles and riders snaked over the sand. There was no use looking behind to the stockade of Fort Williams. The desperate step had been taken.

The desert dawn was a scant half-hour away and in the next half-hour the men and women and children of the fort would know safety or annihilation. Mason rode bare to his browned waist in coarse white trousers and moccasins, feeling the cool wind that comes before the dawn sweep against his parched face and body. Behind him figures of various sizes weaved and bounced in their McClellan saddles, their blue cavalry blouses making them little more than blurs in a column of twos.

"All clear, Wilkinson," he said to the young lieutenant pacing beside him. "You're in command once this train reaches the rise near Rattlesnake Ridge. You've got your orders straight?"

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Wilkinson said huskily. "And thanks for the chance, sir. I'll do my best."

"Just keep on firing when I give the signal. Either Clawfist jumps or he doesn't. The rest is up to me." He gestured toward the shadows that veiled the desert to the south. "We know Clawfist's out there about five miles, waiting to attack at dawn. That long-haired Mex teamster's hand I sent out there in a breechclout and headband brought that news in. Torque got to Clawfist all right."

HE REINED down with Wilkinson and let the column pass. It went forward slowly and split up, the wagons lurching ahead of the troop of riders. In the east the paling light grew grayer; dawn would rush across the cactus-dotted sand soon, and battle would begin.

"Fort up the train, Wilkinson. Keep the Gatlings in the wagons aimed for heaven when the Apache charge starts."

"Yes, sir. And thanks again for the chance. If I hadn't let Torque get out—"

"Dry up. It's another day."

Mason jammed his heels into his mount's flank and trotted fast past the awkward column of riders. The ground rose, boulder-strewn and rugged, and he went by the side of a heavy freighter with its canvas side cut out to let the muzzle of a tripod-mounted Gatling protrude. He passed a second freighter just drawing to a halt with a second Gatling jutting from the hole in its canvas, and Sergeant Fifer on horseback by the tail-gate.

"All right, Sergeant?"

"All right, Captain. I can't hit a barn door with the damn thing but I know how to fire it."

Mason trotted on. His orders had been

given, the madness-inspired plan was in action, there was nothing further to do but wait and hope. And take a last look at Handsome Randy Reed and his sister Leslie in the ambulance.

He drew up at its rear and looked in silently. Leslie's face was watchful and fatigued in the lanternlight as she bent over the splint-wrapped form on the ambulance stretcher. She was wearing the second lieutenant's blouse again. Soundless as he was, she heard Mason and turned.

"How is he?"

"Do you care, Captain Mason? As a matter of fact, he's just about coming out of the morphine."

On the stretcher Reed began to mutter raggedly.

"I'm not going to ask you questions, Captain Mason," Leslie said. "This scarecrow column is some kind of a decoy, I know. It's up to us to obey your orders, no matter how you came to be in command. I'm not even going to ask you where G Company is, or why you're riding stripped to the waist."

"Clawfist can pour hundreds of braves over the walls of the fort anywhere he wants to and swamp us all," Mason said thickly. "Out here we've got a tight ring of boulders and wagons, with no roofs to fire above our heads and burn us out. Here we may be able to stick it out until the infantry gets in."

Out of the thick muttering from Reed words began to be distinguishable.

"What—how—"

A sudden splash of flame lit the final minutes of the dark. It surged up from the inside of the fort a mile away. Billowing, pulsing into the paling arch, it told that Fort Williams had been abandoned and was afire, the garrison gone.

"What's that?" broke out Leslie.

"Something for Clawfist."

Reed's voice rose, stronger, but still delirious. "Tell that damn Bullhead Mason—"

"Good-by," said Mason abruptly.

He kneed his mount away from the ambulance. Around him on the rise the figures in uniform, with carbines in hand, were being posted by Lieutenant Wilkinson. Mason slapped heels and went down the rise and over the sand for the blur of Rattlesnake Ridge at top speed.

He pulled in beside rangy Lieutenant Hunt, stripped to the waist, and also wearing Apaches' white trousers. From behind the cover of the ridge crest, out of sight in the lifting gloom, came the stamp of many horses and the low-voiced muttering of men.

"You know the situation and the plan," Mason said curtly. "In two minutes more you lead the circle. Keep an eye on me. I stay on this ridge, watching for Clawfist. You put on the show with G, Hunt, I direct it. That enough?"

"Enough, sir. Good show, I think, sir."

THE sky to the east lightened fast. Mason took a last look toward the blazing fort in the distance, let his eyes rest on the ring of uniforms and wagons, now becoming plainer in the increased visibility, and he breathed hard. Creeping rapidly, a warm golden light appeared on the eastern horizon.

"Go, Hunt!"

"G Company, forward!" yelled Hunt.

He pelted down the slope and onto the wasteland. Over the ridge tore the strangely accoutered horses and men that made up G Company, and their dust streamed back into Mason's eyes. He lifted his Colt and fired a single shot skyward. Instantly the crackle of gunfire came from the rise where the wagons stood; the spits of flame lit the half-murk.

An alarm rocket soared upward and burst in crimson balls, visible clear to Old Mexico. Another rocket and another rushed skyward and exploded, spelling the wagon train's cry for help.

Almost instantly, it seemed to Mason, dawn light came rushing across the desert from the sun lifting now over the horizon, and the scene leaped clear. Around the wagons and the blue uniforms raced G Company in the deadly Apache circle. At a distance no one could tell them from Apaches. Their sun-browned bodies half-

naked or clad in long Apache shirts from the post trader's store, with shoulder-length black manes and Turkey red headbands, riding bare-backed, they were perfect in the part.

And the men in blue uniforms back of the spitting carbines looked like the real thing in fighting troopers, although the uniforms had been crammed onto quartermaster's soldiers, housekeeping troops and teamsters, trader's clerks, and half-grown boys and Mexicans, all the transient population of Fort Williams.

A few husky young wives of noncoms and privates who knew firearms were in that firing line. The older women and the children crouched in the canvas-covered wagons.

Even with every shot from the bogus Apaches and Gatling guns going high over the targets the sham battle looked like actual combat. Would it take in Clawfist, the crafty old killer, at long range? Would he think the reservation braves he expected had arrived and cut off the getaway of the fort personnel?

CHAPTER VII

The Ambush

WITH his glasses, Mason studied the empty waste to the south while the G Company Indians yelled and shot on in their dust-streaming circle. He was trying to put his mind inside the mind of Clawfist out yonder. Almost at once he caught the tiny plumes of dust across the miles, strung out in a long disorderly line. Clawfist and his horsemen were coming!

In minutes Clawfist's naked eyes would make out and study the battle. They would see what was apparently a hard, deadly ring of desperate troops putting up the stiffest of defenses. Would Clawfist fling in his own riders to swamp the blue ring and take terrible losses, or would he veer to the burning fort where there was loot—whisky and blankets and tobacco—leaving the Apache reinforcements to keep the wagon train pinned down?

On the far desert the dust plumes slowed and halted. Now was the moment of Clawfist's decision, and Mason meant to make up his mind for him.

He reached down to his waistband and drew out the improvised Apache mane of flimsy tow that had been dipped in a kettle of boiling boot blacking, and wormed it onto his head under a band of Turkey red calico. He tore down from the crest of Rattlesnake Ridge to cut across the circle of G Company's Apaches and hauled rein beside a knot of six Indian-garbed troopers—the demolition crew he had left behind in the fort, who had caught up with the action.

"All right, Gatling crew!" he bit out. "If Clawfist keeps on to join this battle go in and man the machine-guns on the wagons while we hit him on the flank and fall back on the train. If Clawfist swerves off, follow G Company."

Shots still slammed from the boulders, the Gatlings blew the morning sky apart and the racing "Indians" under Hunt swept around to pass Mason. Once more Mason had his glasses to his eyes. Out where Clawfist lurked there was dusty motion.

"Swerving!" Mason said huskily, as Hunt pulled in next him, his horse's forelegs beating air. "Clawfist's swerving! He's going for the fort and the loot the way I hoped. Race him to it! Forward, h-o-o-o!"

Under him his mount leaped into a rushing gallop and his hand signaled the change in the circle's course. A mile to go to the stockade where the flames were dying down but the black smoke of destruction still roiled.

Gunfire from the blue ring ceased, the Apache circle looped out straight for a run to the stockade. To Clawfist it would look as if his reinforcements from the reservation, who had hit too tough a porcupine, were trying to reach the fort in time to get the cream of the loot first. No Apache threw his life away without a good reason for it; easy loot came ahead of killing.

Now there was nothing to do but let events follow their bloody course to a bloody finish. In a long, undisciplined straggle Mason led his riders, waving their weapons in simulated triumph, across the distance that their stripped mounts covered in minutes. With Clawfist's attackers still two miles off but coming at full velocity, he angled and swept in through the open, deserted south gate.

With the reek of raw whisky smashing into his nostrils from the barrels that had been broken open and were puddling the sand inside the gate, he rushed his mount in onto an area of disaster. Smoke bellied across the big parade ground in banks, stirred by the dawn breeze, flame leaped from the roof of a condemned warehouse that blazed from end to end. Old wagons burned here and there, piles of hay behind officers' cottages and smaller buildings sent up sable clouds that looked as though the buildings themselves were afire.

"Break!" yelled Mason. "We've pulled 'em in!"

"Sure did."

Hunt's painted face split in a harsh grin. He split the straggle and took twenty white-shirted, sweating men toward the long, low-roofed trader's post. The blacking from their false manes stained their cheeks, they looked like scarecrows, but there was no comedy in their faces; only a firm and hard resolve, mixed with hope.

"Come on, Gatling crew!" yelled Mason. "Headquarters roof!"

He flung himself off horse at the Headquarters building and crouched behind the rain barrel at its corner from which the long cuts ran out through the baked earth in tiny trenches leading to a single center. The freed horses ran here and there and stopped, G Company Apaches danced up and down on the porches of Officer's Row cottages. Everywhere Clawfist and his Apaches looked they were going to see a disorderly mob of reservation braves in ahead of them, looting and getting the best of everything without a fight.

CLAWFIST and his riders were coming now in two sections. In a racing crowd that filled the south gate from side to side a mass of Indians sent their ponies through and came streaming down the parade ground. Out from the wide door of the adobe post a dozen G Company Indians were trundling a whisky barrel. They upended it and smashed it open with an ax, dipping into it with tin cups and howling as the liquor ran over their chins. Other Indian troopers pitched bolts of red cloth out of the open windows and brandished handfuls of cigars.

"Yaaiiiiii—eeeee!" rose the answer from Clawfist's riders, rushing to join the looting before it was too late.

Mason saw Hunt's long arm rise in signal and his fake Apaches plunged back into the post. He saw them leap out the back windows and tear for the cover of two upended wagons, crouching down behind them with carbines and Colts ready.

Up to the door of the trader's post pelted the mounted Apaches, flung themselves off and rushed into the building by door and low windows. In the parade ground their horses milled, the trader's post echoed with their din.

"More than a hundred," Mason grimly said.

He lowered his Colt muzzle and fired into the black powder covering the bottom of the six-inch deep trench in front of him. It ran to within fifty feet of the building, where it split into shallower branches. Flame leaped, smoke roiled and ran with the speed of a desert jack-rabbit, breaking into the channels each of which led into a separate section of the low-roofed trading post.

The fire in the outer right-hand trench outstripped the others, vanished in the end of the building and, roaring, detonating, the whole section of the structure went up. The opposite end blew so fast its explosion almost blended with the first, then the whole center of the post erupted in a ghastly blast of smoke and flame.

Crouched behind his barrel, Mason reeled with shock. Where the trader's

post had stood Apache bodies, arms and legs, adobe bricks, wooden timbers, rose skyward and fell. Clawfist's raiders, charging into the trap, had been blown to fragments by every pound of blasting powder in the fort.

"Gatlings, take the rest!" screamed Mason.

Deafened, he could hardly hear his own voice. Above him, from the machine guns mounted on the Headquarters roof, crashed the fire of the revolving barrels, aimed at the mass of Apaches who had pulled up at a distance from the trading post, unable to rush its doors for the crowd. Ripping and slicing, the fusillade caught them dumb-stricken, the explosion tearing them off their horses and strewing the sand with more bloody human litter.

Snapshooting from behind their wagons, Lieutenant Hunt and his group picked off the fringes of Apaches who ran for a cover that didn't exist on the bare parade ground. From the open windows of Headquarters and Officers' Row cottages the carbines of more troopers jutted, shooting into the wreck of Clawfist's force.

Mason slumped forward, his stomach collapsing from the reaction of relief. He caught himself with one hand on the barrel. This was it! It was incredible but the ambush was complete. As a screeching straggle of Apaches galloped for the gate and the desert there weren't more than forty of them. Almost two hundred of Clawfist's tribesmen had been blotted off the face of the map, crippled by wounds or had their hands up in surrender.

The whole action had taken hardly more than minutes. But in battle a minute could be an eternity.

The last blasts of the Gatlings on the roof took the fragments of Clawfist's horsemen going out the gate and a blanketlike silence dropped. Nothing to do now but herd up the remnants of the Apache attackers and call back the decoy troops from the wagon ring out on the desert.

"Push those Apaches into the nearest warehouse, Lieutenant Hunt, and lock them up!" shouted Mason, and Hunt waved back in answer.

A SUDDEN faint clatter began and Gates, the signal corporal, ran for the telegraph shack. He burst out of it with a message sheet in his hand and tore for Mason, pulling up in front of him.

"From Colonel Church at the reservation, sir. I left the wire open as you ordered."

"Good, Corporal."

The message was short:

> Captain Randolph Reed,
> Fort Williams
> One hundred and fifty braves broke off reservation yesterday headed for Border to join Clawfist. Remainder of Indians bottled up here and rising definitely stopped. Take all precautions.
>
> Church.

One hundred and fifty more Apaches coming, a second striking force running for the Border to join Clawfist! But where were they?

The sudden appalling crash of gunfire to the east seemed to strike on Mason's eardrums with the force of cloudburst thunder. He raced along the Headquarters building to the steps and climbed fast. On the flat rooftop where the crews stood by their smoking Gatlings the watchtower reared and Mason went up the ladder, panting.

He pulled erect on the platform and leveled his glasses. He knew now where Clawfist's reservation braves, the reinforcements he and G Company impersonated, were.

In a disorderly and panic-stricken rout the uniformed men from the wagon ring were racing back across the desert for the fort, the big tilt wagons that held the women and children lumbering along with them. Already they were halfway to the stockade gate. Limned against the sky on the rise, deserted now except for a dozen or more figures in blue, stood the two wagons that held the Gatlings, with the ambulance containing Reed and Leslie between them. Even as Mason stared in horror the wagons, with their teams

hitched, drew apart on the rise and left the ambulance alone to face the oncoming horde.

And far out on the desert in a rushing storm of dust came the white and red shirts of Clawfist's reservation jumpers, charging for their helpless prize.

"The fool! That fool Wilkinson!"

One more raw second lieutenant had pulled a fatal blunder. He had broken what looked like a deadly defensive position out on the desert and now the onrushing Apaches saw a mob of blue uniforms scrambling for safety, leaving the wagons behind. In the wagons were the Gatlings but Wilkinson, at one, was no expert and Sergeant Fifer, at the other, knew nothing of ranging or traversing. The wagons and the ambulance on the rise were abandoned targets and the Apaches were going to overrun them first.

"Hunt!" Mason shouted desperately through cupped hands. "Mount up! The wagons are being attacked!"

Over the parade ground the orders crackled as Mason slid down the ladder to the roof and rushed the stairs. Revolver- and saber-belted, and with carbines in hand, G Company had slammed onto their horses' backs and at a gallop Mason headed them for the gate. The walls of the stockade flashed past and Mason swerved his column, driving across the open waste.

His throat was dry and his heart hammered at his ribs. He galloped past the blue stragglers, bouncing in their saddles on their way to the fort, with hardly a glance at them. His eyes were glued to the dust of the Apaches' charge now hardly a quarter of a mile from the wagons and the ambulance in which the unconscious man and his sister helplessly faced the savage fury of the reservation renegades.

There was no chance whatever that G Company could reach the rise in time for a surprise flank attack on the reservation braves. They would have to meet them head-on, with less than one-third their numbers. And still they would be too late!

CHAPTER VIII

The Feud Is Ended

DISTANCE dwindled by the second, but the Apache charge had swung into the old battle crescent, a long curving line of racing horses and yelling Indians. The machine-gun in the right-hand wagon opened up raggedly. That would be Wilkinson firing, his bullets kicking sand before the Apache attack. The bullets began to pick off riders in an apparently aimless crossfire that left the rest of the Indian line untouched.

A groan broke from Mason and checked in his parched throat. For out of the side of the left-hand wagon, where the tyro Sergeant Fifer's gun stood, leaped a savage sheet of gun flame that took the outer fringe of the charge's far right flank, tore it to ribbons and moved inward, killing as it struck.

It was the enfilade of a master machine-gunner, sweeping like a scythe, taking riders and horses in a welter of destruction. No lead was missing the target.

Wilkinson's faltering fire began to steady, and the twin streams of slugs began to draw together. Howls of savage fury rose, but from that lethal crossfire there was no escape. Mason looked on withering decimation.

Still the charge came on, carried by its own sheer momentum. Mason took his troopers up the slope as the final crest of the Apache flood, the tight center that remained, stormed onto the rise and straight for the wagons.

"Off with those manes so the gunners won't shoot us!" yelled Mason. "Pistols and sabers! Go in!"

In a mad rush he took his column straight in between the wagons and flung it at the welter of Apaches, already reeling under the Gatlings' blasts that took them full at fifty yards. Mason was riding bareback, Colt jumping in his left hand, sabre slashing in his right at the copper faces

and writhing bodies. Behind him the crazy painted troopers of G Company pounded in a flood of steel and gunsmoke that smashed clean through the wreck of the Indian charge and sent it scattering.

Mason pulled down and turned around. He was conscious of Lieutenant Wilkinson's face above the right-hand wagon of Gatling barrels with Sergeant Fifer dropping a last round into the weapon's hopper. Incredulously he looked to the left-hand Gatling whose masterly handling had cut the red foe to pieces. And in the loader's stance he saw a slim figure in a second lieutenant's blouse, and behind it still at the gun, braced on a leg splinted from ankle to thigh, face stony with pain and grim determination, was Captain Handsome Randy Reed. . . .

Not half an hour later stoop-shoulder Dr. Fields dropped off the ambulance and smiled tiredly.

"He'll do, Mason. Extreme pain, of course, and shock reaction now the fight's over, but no extra damage to that splinted-up leg. It's remarkable what a man can force his body to do in an emergency. I've given him another opiate that'll take hold in a few minutes."

Mason dismounted and caught the step of the slowly moving ambulance into which Reed had been transferred. He was back on the stretcher, the skin of his face drawn and blanched, but his eyes were bright. Leslie sat on a low box beside him. Her hair, loosed from under her campaign hat, fell golden about her shoulders.

"Great work, Randy," Mason said huskily. "You saved the fort."

"You saved it first, Bullhead." Reed managed a grin. "Wilkinson told me your plan when I came to in that wagon ring, with the fake firing going on. You think fast and well, Bullhead."

"So do you. We got Clawfist inside the fort, yes, but those reservation reinforcements I had to take a chance on had us cold. No more powder ambush inside. Then you ambushed them beautifully outside."

"Yes. I'm still post commander. I ordered those decoy troopers to run for it and drew the wagons apart to bring the Injuns onto them. Also to give Wilkinson and myself a field for a crossfire enfilade. Nothing can stand against machine-gun enfilade. I learned that when I went to Gatling gun school in Kansas."

MASON'S grin answered Reed's. "And graduated as top honor man as usual, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. And Leslie, who spent the summer with me, learned Gatling's too." Reed winced and his eyes closed with pain.

The axles of the ambulance creaked steadily. Mason could hear the driver in front cursing cheerfully at his mules. The battle was over, the ruck of Apache dead littered the desert, and inside the fort the troopers already would be piling Clawfist's casualties and cleaning up.

"You'll be in the hospital in ten minutes," Mason said soothingly. "Not only is the battle over, but the war's over. Clawfist's power is gone."

A sudden strange peace swept him. There was no hatred or envy in him any longer for Captain Handsome Randy Reed, a stark fighting man to the core, brilliant as he himself could never be. Randy was soldier-born and soldier-bred, and he had inherited all his major-general father's ability and courage the way other men inherited business ability. That was all, and it was enough.

Reed gasped a little.

"The old class came through, Bullhead. Something to send back to the Point. Handsome Randy Reed and Bullhead Mason, fighting together instead of each other, bygones all gone. I'd really forgotten that bad blood when I tried to get you your promotion to Washington. Then we got off on the wrong foot when we met, and waked the feud again."

"I know. My fault, Randy. I jumped to a bullhead conclusion."

"So did I on the platform. I know now you'd spotted Injuns when you knocked my head under cover and I swung myself off into midair going for you. I've told

Leslie, because she'd done some conclusion jumping herself."

"Shake hands, you two damned fools," said Leslie.

The hands of Bullhead Mason and Handsome Randy Reed met in a firm clasp. Mason realized that it was the first time in their lives their hands had ever met, but from now on that clasp of friendship would never be broken. As the grip relaxed Reed drew a long breath and closed his eyes drowsily.

"Take it easy, Randy."

"I will, Bullhead."

Reed's breathing became long and regular, his head rolled to one side on the improvised pillow, and he went into a dreamless sleep as the doctor's opiate took hold. The ambulance jolted on, broken noises sounded ahead, as they neared the fort gate.

"I really did hate you, Bullhead Mason," Leslie said quietly. "For a long time, until I learned how Randy was changed for the better after that fight at the Point. Other classmates I met later told me so. He stopped using his looks to cut out other men with girls. He told me himself he was always under criticism and that that was the way he fought back. It was almost a relief to him to be marred. A general's son is always in the limelight, either toadied up to or belittled, and so is a general's daughter. I'm supposed to be a lily-handed, snobbish, gold-braid girl in the drawing rooms at Washington. Do you suppose I ever told anyone I know how to load and run a Gatling? They'd laugh at me."

"Those Injuns out there aren't laughing."

"I dance beautifully. Even my worst girl enemies admit, but they don't know I can flap up a wonderful mess of buckwheat cakes. Do you prefer buckwheats to bullets, Captain Bullhead Mason?"

She was laughing at him again. She didn't hate him, he didn't hate her, and he never had. He had seen ridicule where none was meant, he had mistaken friendly raillery for hostile irony, he'd been in love with this girl since the first moment they'd met, and he had raged futilely at a nonexistent barrier between them. Bullheadedness might be valuable in battle, but not in human relations.

"Too long on the desert," she said, "too long fighting Indians with no rest. Ten years of all work and no play for Bullhead Mason. It'd make any man hard and maybe bitter and overprone to brood on an old feud."

"I guess you're right."

"A little civilization for awhile? You'll be the lion of the drawing rooms on this fort business when you take your furlough in Washington. I imagine they'll call you there at once now."

"I'm not taking my furlough in Washington! I'm taking it here, right in this fort!"

HE KNEW now what he wanted above all else—to be near this girl beside him. He could, in sun-scorched Fort Williams, and he wouldn't mind the heat, the glare or the dust any longer. For thirty days he'd see her every day. And after that their trails would separate.

"Here in the fort? Why ever—"

"Captain Mason!"

The call came from outside. The ambulance driver pulled down. Mason saw the stockade logs looming.

"Business," said Leslie and smiled.

Mason jumped to the ground. Apache bodies lay along the gate walls where the Gatlings had hit the rear of Clawfist's flight.

"Well, Wilkinson?"

"Torque," said Wilkinson, and gestured toward a broken copper-brown body next the wall. "Thought you'd like to know right away. He didn't get away the second time."

"Good! That leaves Clawfist, but his army's shattered."

Sergeant Fifer grinned from the back of the horse he was reining down.

"Clawfist's on Headquarters desk waiting for the Captain. I just laid him there wrapped up neat in an old bandanna."

"Fifer, are you crazy?"

"What's left of the old redskin, I mean,

Captain. Picked up about thirty yards from where the trader's post blew. Right arm up to the elbow, silver chief's bracelet, Clawfist hand. It's Clawfist, all right."

"Ah!"

All cleaned up, the whole war cleaned up. Peace on the Border at last. Smoke still wafted from the blasted post, torn Apache bodies stained the parade ground, but it was the wreckage of victory. Mason's eyes went to the ambulance, trotting well up the parade ground, and Fifer's gaze followed his.

"Sergeant! Off that horse pronto! I want it!"

"I'm in the air, captain."

Fifer's boots had hardly hit ground before Mason had vaulted into saddle. He went at the gallop and pulled to a walk at the ambulance step. Leslie smiled out at him.

"Why am I taking my furlough in this post? Because you're not going to be in Washington this winter. You plan to go abroad."

"I've changed my mind. I'm staying here with Randy till his convalescence is over and he's back to duty. Then I'm going back to Washington."

"With me?" Incredible hope rose in the words.

"Exactly, Captain Bullhead Mason." Her smile was the most glorious thing he had ever seen. "We're passing Headquarters, Captain Bullhead Mason. You'll have to drop off and attend to the backwash of battle as acting post commander. After that I'll—I'll be waiting for you—Alvin."

"You—you—"

"Army job first. That's the orders from the General's daughter. Yes, I'll be waiting for you, Alvin."

And he knew that she would.

SHREWD VERDICT

TEXANS, far-famed for their realistic interpretation of justice, still get a terrific kick out of recalling the typically shrewd verdict rendered by Texan George Higgins in the killing of Wes Hardin.

Higgins, a preacher-physician, examined Hardin's body shortly after the great gunfighter was shot down by John Selman in an El Paso saloon on August 19, 1895.

Old John, a noted gunslinger in his own right, had walked up behind Wes in the Acme Saloon and calmly pumped a .45 caliber slug into the back of Wes's head while he was peacefully engaged in shaking dice with the bartender. The bullet emerged from Hardin's eye, and for a time there was considerable doubt among excited eyewitnesses as to whether Wes had been shot from in front or behind. An inquest was held and Justice Howe, the presiding judge, called the Reverend Doctor Higgins to the stand.

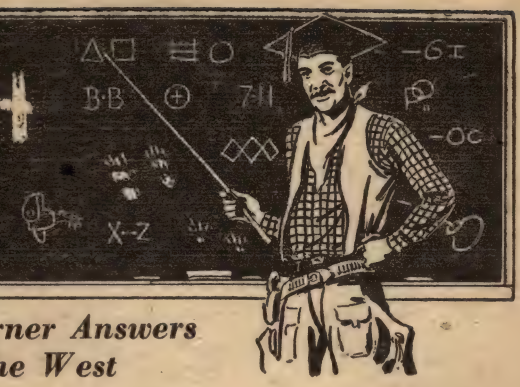
"Doctor Higgins, in your professional opinion as a physician," asked Justice Howe, "was the deceased, John Wesley Hardin, shot in the eye or in the back of the head? I must remind you that upon your answer may hinge a charge of murder to be placed against Hardin's killer—John Selman."

Here was a nice problem in ethics for the preacher-physician. Doctor Higgins deliberated, thoughtfully rubbing his jaw. Then he straightened his shoulders, looked the judge straight in the eye, and replied:

"Your Honor, I will answer your question in this manner. If Wes Hardin was shot in the eye, I'd say it was excellent marksmanship. If he was shot in the back of the head, then I'd say it was excellent judgment!"

—Norman B. Wiltsey

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY



A Quiz Corral in Which a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

These five interesting questions come from Sherry G. of Maine. 1.—What is the difference between "hogging" and "roaching" a horse's mane 2.—Do cowboys ever do either to their horses? 3.—Where and why are single-rigged saddles used in preference to double-rigged ones? How about center-fire rigging? 4.—Is there any advantage to a breast-plate on a Western saddle? 5.—Do cowboys ever use a martingale?

Answers. **1.**—Trimming a horse's mane short to make it stand up like bristles—in effect a "crew haircut"—is called both "hogging" and "roaching." "Hogging" is in the dictionary but not much used among cowfolks, while "roaching" is quite common in cow country usage but not in most dictionaries. It is probably a corruption of "ruche" or "rouche," meaning a frill with pleats or ruffles. Whenever used at all in my part of the West, "hogging" means a shorter "crew cut" than "roaching."

2.—Yes, sometimes cowboys hog or roach a horse's mane, but not very often. The commonest reason is for looks. Spanish-American riders in particular seem to think a roached mane makes a horse look stylish. Other reasons for roaching may be to give a thin, straggly or unhealthy mane a fresh start, or to get rid of cocklebur tangles. Some say it keeps a horse cooler in hot country. A thick, long forelock is often trimmed to keep it out of a horse's eyes.

3.—'Way back yonder before cowboyin' spread out all over, California *vaqueros* rode single-rigged (one cinch) saddles, while Texas cowhands preferred the double-rig (two cinches). Both styles spread to other parts of the cow-range, but the Texas style, like Texas cattle, spread farther and is in more general use today. I know of no particular place where single-rigs are in general use in preference to double, but they are often used by cowboys on any range with no heavy roping to do, and some *Californios* still stick to the Spanish single-rig, center fire saddle, with one broad cinch geared on about the middle (endwise) of the saddle tree. My wife and I ride our saddles single-rigged most of the time for the simple reason that we don't need a second cinch for ordinary pleasure riding.

4.—For rodeo ropers a breast-plate is just that much more anchorage to hold the saddle firmly in place. It also serves to keep a saddle from slipping tailward on steep mountain trails, but if too snug or not plenty wide and properly adjusted, it can also hamper a horse's wind. It is also used for "style."

5.—On range cow work most cowboys rarely use a martingale unless it is to break a horse of rearing, head-tossing or traveling too high headed. But in rodeo parades and arenas you'll see a lot of them, mostly for style or for the reasons noted above. A spirited horse will usually "prance purty" with a martingale on. Spanish-American cowboys especially seem to like that.

I might add that there is a considerable variety of opinion among cowboys about most all items of riding gear.

—S. Omar Barker

It had been a lucky shot

By
PETE
CURTIS

Badman from Rhode Island

Johnny Wyatt finds out the hard way that fame with a gun is not all it's cracked up to be

JOHNNY WYATT leaned negligently against a board awning post of the Cattlemen's Hotel in the cowtown of Saguache. It was a summer-cool Colorado night, but thirty minutes ago in the New Friends Saloon, diagonally across the dusty street, it had been plenty hot — too hot for Johnny Wyatt. He had almost lost his life. Except for a lucky shot triggered by his own hand, he would have lost it.

And such a lucky shot! He had meant to drill that jasper dead center, but he

had thrown down so fast his lead had smashed the other man's gun arm, sent the fellow's .44 clattering to the floor. Nervousness at the crucial moment had spoiled Johnny's aim. But that was to be expected. After all, it had been his first gunfight. He felt downright cocky after it was all over, but a little shaky.

No one, passing by, could discern this uncertainty in Johnny's nonchalant attitude now. Everybody glanced at him. Some with admiration, some with wonder, some with inscrutability masking dark faces. To their way of thinking, Johnny had spared his adversary's life by breaking the man's gun arm — as fine an exhibition of gun handling as had ever been seen in Saguache.

He leaned there in the soft-breezed night, pleasantly aware of his conspicuousness. He was a slender young fellow of middle height, his face smoothly handsome, freshly tanned. A big gray stetson was tipped to the back of his head, blond curls clinging damply to his brow. A Colt .45 six-shooter was settled in a low-slung, tied-down holster. He dragged on a cigarette, and eyed the indolent strollers, the horsemen coming and going.

Johnny loved this abrupt notoriety. Wasn't that why he had come West? But Johnny was troubled. He had not been as calm and calculating as a top-hand gunman should be in a shoot-out. Hitting that fellow's arm had been pure luck — life-saving luck.

Back home on the farm outside of Providence, Rhode Island, how many times had he gone off by himself with his precious six-shooter? How many hours of incessant practice had he put in to perfect his draw-and-shoot? Easily thousands, and then he had to go and muff his first gun match!

THE West had called, and to Johnny's perky ears had come tales of cattle booms, gold and silver strikes, Apache fighting, men getting rich over night — enough to set any younker's heart a-hammering.

His folks had been sad and upset when Johnny had left. He had been eighteen then, flooded with hope and fantastic dreams. He'd stopped, finally, in New Mexico Territory, hitched on to a big cattle spread. A swamper, nothing more, breaking in to a cowboy's rigorous life. He could ride, but not well enough, and could tangle himself in a rope quicker than any locoed bronc.

But Johnny had not been disheartened. He knew it took years to learn to be a first-class cowboy, and if he couldn't become proficient, there was one profession for which he did seem to have a natural bent. Cards! He always seemed to win. The boys on the Boxed O swore that Johnny had the longest streak of luck of any man who ever lived.

One disgruntled puncher had advised him to take up gambling instead of trying to throw a rope. Johnny had thought of this a good deal, and little thrills shot through him every time he pictured himself as a professional gambler, suave, independent and prosperous.

But little thrills went through him every time he saw or thought of a girl named Glory Duncun, too. She was the daughter of the owner of the Boxed O, and it was she who caused a delay in his trailing out abruptly to the new, exciting life. Although no one knew of this except Johnny.

To his mind, Glory was as pretty as anything in the West. She seemed the personification of all that was best and finest in Western things female, with her spirited riding and vivaciousness, her quick temper that always had a streak of the pixy in it.

Naturally, Johnny had known he didn't have a chance with Glory Duncun. There had been plenty of top-hand waddies always sparking her. But he'd liked to be around where she was, and even enjoyed her teasing him whenever she caught him off by himself practicing his draw-and-shoot.

"You have to be a natural, Johnny," she'd tell him with a humorous glint in

her soft gray eyes. "You'd better stick to being a cowpuncher, or take up a homestead. You'll live longer."

Johnny had taken her good-natured barbs in stride, his determination to make a name for himself in the new land never wavering. But leaving Glory had been hard to do, and the last time he'd seen her was the only time he remembered her being serious with him.

She'd held his hand and said, "You're a good boy, Johnny — but a babe in the woods in this country. Be careful, Johnny, be careful — and good luck."

His eyes had misted, and he had been tempted to stick around a while longer. But what would have been the use? How could an inexperienced kid like him win Glory Duncun's heart? She was the sweetheart of the Boxed O, and was sad any time a puncher packed his warbag.

Glory's words came back to him now, after these three years since he'd seen her, while he languished in sudden fame outside the Cattlemen's Hotel in Saguache. And a queasy feeling was in his belly. He thought, all that training with a gun, and I had to hit his arm!

The soft breeze felt good on his face. Tiny spirals of dust whipped up the dully lighted street. He saw hulking, round-shouldered Sheriff Buck Ramsey come out of the New Friends Saloon. The lawman made a straight path for the hotel and stopped before Johnny.

"I got the story, Johnny," rumbled the old man. "You're clear."

Johnny smiled disarmingly. "Didn't want to kill the gent, Buck," he lied with easy grace. "Reckon I got to pussy-foot around this settlement from now on?" Johnny's voice was a studied, slow drawl, as Western as he could make it.

"No," Sheriff Buck replied. "Larsh was right drunk, and mean because he lost. He'll pack his warbag and get now, but keep your guard up from here on. Plenty of high-flown gents, trying to make a name. And don't start nothing yourself, Johnny."

"Ain't likely to, Buck." Johnny grinned.

THE sheriff clumped on down the boardwalk, thick, wide shoulders swinging, heavy hips swiveling rhythmically to the jingle of his spurs.

Johnny's name spread throughout the territory, though he hadn't done so much to warrant the fame. He went about town with his lofty gunman's pose. He lived blissfully on his reputation, but with a sharp eye, a steady gun hand and a faint, amused smile seeming perpetually on his thin, hard lips. He'd come a long way since his plowing days back on the farm outside of Providence. He began looking about for a girl who could measure up to Glory Duncun down in New Mexico Territory, but his luck was not at all good.

So time trailed by. His winnings were prodigious. That old cowpoke down on the Boxed O spread had certainly been prophetic — up to a certain point.

The night Tote Harbor sat in was a bad one. Tote owned the Three Eights, a two-bit cattle spread on the range south of Saguache. He was boisterously happy as he dragged up a chair to Johnny's table, smacked down a bottle of liquor and a shot glass.

"Better get your fiddle in tune, Johnny," he boomed confidently. "I'm walking out winners this night."

All the players grinned.

Johnny said, "Wish you luck, friend. But you already seem to be primed with it."

"Ain't that the truth!" Tote agreed good-naturedly.

Tote Harbor looked to be in his middle twenties, with a lean-cheeked, sun-darkened face. He had a rugged build, and a couple of little flames danced in his gleaming eyes. Once he reached down and adjusted the holstered gun on his right leg.

"Sold thirty beef steers today, boys," he informed. "Got a good price."

Then he settled back and played cards, the happy light still sparking his eyes.

The New Friends filled with townsmen, and punchers from outlying spreads. Tote Harbor's whisky bottle slowly diminished its weight, and Johnny watched the burly

rancher with a guarded eye.

The happy grin on Harbor's face had long since gone. He was losing steadily, and as each pot was raked in, he cursed without restraint. The others at the table glanced swiftly at his darkly flushed face, nervous and vexed at having to sit in with a sore-head.

Johnny took it upon himself to speak to Harbor. His tone was friendly, considerate. "Seems like you're bucking the wrong table tonight, Tote. Can't see where your luck is likely to turn."

It was a plain invitation for Harbor to bow out, while he still had any money left. But he stared at Johnny, liquor firing his heart and inflaming his slitted eyes.

"Ain't my loot good enough for you?" he snarled.

Johnny shrugged indifferently, but he glanced sharply at Harbor's dark face. He mused speculatively, this could turn out bad. Got to watch this ranihan with a hawk-eye.

Harbor's belligerency had killed enthusiasm for play, and at intervals the other players left the game.

Tote and Johnny played on. Nobody else sat in, for the word had spread that Harbor was mean and on the prod. At last Tote's heavy, wide shoulders slumped despairingly. His thick arms propped his body up from the table. He was flat broke.

Johnny watched him warily, used to seeing this drunken dejectedness in men who had lost their rolls. He was sorry for the man, but business was business. Johnny was reaching for a stogie when he saw the wicked light in Harbor's bloodshot eyes, the twisted expression on the weathered face. His hand came down slowly as Harbor murmured:

"Sometimes I wonder if you deal strictly from the top."

He's calling it now, thought Johnny. Another mean one, like that Larsh gent.

Johnny let out a profound sigh. "Tote, I'll forget that remark if you pull foot quiet-like."

HARBOR'S eyes flashed instant hate. He pushed himself erect and flung his chair aside. His long arms hung tensely as he paced back and halted.

"Why, you damned gunslinger," he growled hoarsely, "who the hell you think you're talking to?"

Johnny came slowly to his feet. He had no doubt as to what was coming. His gun hand tingled, suddenly, as he readied the muscles that would be employed. This time he didn't dare miss if he wanted to come out alive. No man's luck rode a streak that long. But an irrepressible tang of pleasure stole through him, a sinister urge that made him want to match Tote Harbor's gun draw.

However, he spoke quietly. "You can still walk out, Tote."

Tote Harbor snarled viciously, "After you're dead!" and went for his gun.

Johnny's Colt cleared leather, the hammer snicked back in that blurred movement. His eyes riveted to that big chest as his gun flashed down to his aim.

The weapon roared and lanced powder flame. A second later, Harbor's gun thundered. The reports rocketed off the walls, hanging in the room.

Harbor was starting to topple. His slug had gone wild and smashed the whisky bottle on the table. He had taken the jolting impact of Johnny's lead squarely in his chest. His knees buckled fully then, and his tall, hard body doubled over and struck the floor.

A long, painful sigh escaped some of the men.

Johnny, through squinted eyes, and with lips distorted, stared at the body. There was elation in him that he attempted to fight down. His draw-and-shoot had been snake-fast, skillful, deadly accurate. Pride sang through his veins.

He sheathed his smoking sixgun, flicked a few stray drops of whisky from his pants, stuck a stogie jauntily into a mouth corner, and strode leisurely out the swing doors. He swaggered to the front of the hotel and took up his leaning position against the awning post.

Sheriff Buck Ramsey would find him waiting.

Some minutes later the sheriff came plodding across the street. It was a warm night, soft and dark, with an occasional gust of wind sweeping through the town.

Sheriff Buck snapped, "You killed this one, Johnny."

"I reckon so," was the flat, unconcerned reply.

"He went for his gun and you beat him to the shoot," the sheriff recounted the description of witnesses.

Johnny nodded in agreement. "Him and that Larsh feller," he murmured distastefully. "They're all alike. Lose their dinero, then claim the game is crooked."

"Larsh is nothing but a saddle-tramp," Sheriff Buck stated. "Harbor comes from better stock."

"That so?"

"He come up from New Mexico Territory and worked hard to start that Three Eights. Reckon he figured to have a little fling and jumped in too deep."

"So?" grunted Johnny.

"So you made his wife a widow and killed his little girl's dad."

Johnny Wyatt was shocked. His reaction was like a solid blow against his chest. He stared at the sheriff's grizzled face in tormented disbelief, his mouth slack.

The stocky sheriff began moving back across the street.

"Buck!" Johnny called suddenly.

He jumped from the steps and hurried after the lawman. Ramsey swung around.

Johnny muttered bewilderedly, "This is a hell of a note, Buck!"

"Yes, it is," conceded the sheriff. "Only thing is, you should have shot Harbor in the arm and killed Larsh."

JOHNNY'S eyes swept along the line of three-footed, hip-shot ponies in front of the New Friends.

"Which is Harbor's mount?" he asked.

Sheriff Buck gave him a quizzical stare. "What you want to know for?"

"Somebody has got to tell his wife. I figure it should be me."

"You loco? That filly is spunky as an outlaw bronc. Liable to plant a slug in your head."

"I got some loot of hers," Johnny returned, unperturbed. "Which horse, Buck?"

Ramsey hesitated, pondering the move. "All right. It's that claybank there, near the end of the rack. Know where the Three Eights is?"

"I passed the road once when I was out looking the country over," Johnny informed. He swung away.

Harbor's claybank was fiddle-footed at having a new rider, but soon settled down and jogged onto the south road out of town.

A star-flung sky flushed the black night out on the range. Coyotes gabbled in the brush. Two hours later Johnny recognized the wagon road that led through hilly range to the Three Eights.

Half-way down a long slope, he made out a dark huddle of buildings. His heart kicked his ribs. This was worse than any gun match. All the way out he had tried to think of the easiest way to let a woman and little girl know their man was dead. There wasn't any easy way. A galling bitterness choked him as he thought of his smugness and disdainful air after he had killed Tote Harbor.

A hound began yapping down there. Then the claybank's shod hoofs made a hollow signal crossing a plank bridge. He swung to the yard. A yellow light flickered suddenly inside a squat house, and Johnny dismounted before a door and tied the pony to a hitch-post.

He stood waiting in the dark, apprehensively. The door opened and a woman stood behind the screen, holding up an oil lamp.

"Who is it?" she asked. "That isn't you, is it, Tote?"

Johnny took a deep breath. "No, ma'am, this is John Wyatt, I—"

His words chopped off as he stared incredulously at the woman. Recognition dragged him stiffly forward, his face out-

thrust, his eyes slitted with intense scrutiny. The screen was a good camouflage, and he could not be sure. He opened the door with an unsteady hand, then gasped:

"Glory Duncun!"

"Hello, Johnny." Glory smiled faintly. "I'm Mrs. Tote Harbor now."

He had a hard time swallowing, and he felt like crawling under something. Trickles of sweat started under his arms.

Glory murmured in a strange tone, "That's a Three Eight horse, isn't it? The one Tote rode out this morning?" She was silent a moment, then invited, "Come in, Johnny."

Johnny stepped numbly inside. They were in the kitchen. Glory set the lamp on an oil-cloth-covered table. Her glossy, rust-burnished hair was piled high on her head, and she wore a blue quilted robe over a body that was a trifle fuller, accentuating curves that Johnny did not remember. In spite of his painful misery, he could not help but take in her good looks, some of that old feeling he'd had for her years ago coming back.

He had a hard time beginning, but he finally got out, "Ma'am, I didn't know — I never even figured you were in this section. How long you been — "

"A little over a year — since we started the Three Eights. Hardly have time to go to town, been so busy. Tote and I were married on the Boxed O not so long after you went away three years ago. We have a little girl named Betty Lou. Was here quite a spell before I heard of the famous John Wyatt of Saguache and his — his accomplishments. I knew it was you, without having to see. It was quite a surprise, I can tell you."

Harshness marred the soft contours of her face then. She fronted him more squarely, standing by the table.

"Well, Johnny," she prompted abruptly. "What's happened? Let's have the story."

PULLING in a heavy, quavering breath, Johnny thought desperately, tell her and get it over with and he said, "Ma'am, sometimes a man gets to drinking and gambling, then he ups and — Well, I — "

"He's dead, isn't he, Johnny?" she broke in swiftly.

Johnny did not answer. He looked down at the floor, holding his black hat in his hands.

She went on, her voice clear and matter-of-fact, although there was obvious control in her manner. "He took the money he got for the steers and gambled and drank it away. Then he got mean and wanted to fight. That right?"

Johnny murmured, "Yes, ma'am."

"Would he have killed you?" she asked.

Johnny's head jerked up. "How'd you figure I — "

"He was going to shoot you, wasn't he?"

"I believe so," Johnny muttered.

Glory paused, a ragged sigh escaping her. "I realize you're here out of the goodness of your heart, Johnny. Tote wasn't the best father in the world, but he had his good ways. You saw one of his bad ones tonight. But my little girl hasn't got a father now, and I'm without a man to run the place."

Johnny's hands turned the hat over and over. "Yes, ma'am," he agreed, shaking his head sadly. "When I learned he had a wife and little girl, it was all-powerful hard to take."

Her gray eyes became gentler as she studied his face in profound silence. Then she murmured. "You're still a boy, aren't you?"

Johnny flushed, and his eyes came up to meet hers. His gaze trailed over the healthy tawniness of her soft face.

"Maybe," he answered thoughtfully. "And maybe you ain't so much older'n me as you figure."

"I don't know about that," she whispered. She turned suddenly, to pace a few steps across the room. Her firm breasts stirred as she swung about. "Well, he's dead," she snapped bitterly. "I've always expected it to happen to Tote."

Her eyes flashed defiant sparks but, as he glanced at her, he could see that she was not far from crying.

Johnny felt compassion sweep through him. "Ma'am, the money I won — it's yours, and more. I don't — "

"The money will help, yes. But what happens tomorrow, or the next day, or the next year? Who's to work the spread?"

Johnny was tongue-tied. Under her hot stare he muttered, "Maybe an extra puncher — "

"There are two now, down in the bunkhouse!" she ranted at him suddenly. "What I need is somebody to run them, not another one like 'em." Her pretty head cocked sideward, and she gave Johnny an appraising scrutiny. "You were learning to ride and rope pretty slick down on the Boxed O."

"What you mean, ma'am?" he asked.

Her biting eyes traveled his entire frame critically. "I mean that maybe you could help me out a spell!"

Johnny's jaw dropped in slack dumbness. It took him a good while to get his tongue working, and when he did he couldn't manage much more than a stammer.

"Ma'am, I don't — I hardly reckon — I couldn't handle a spread. Ain't much in my line. You don't mean — "

Glory returned coldly, "Of course, if you don't want to help me."

"Oh, but I do, ma'am!" Johnny interposed anxiously. "I'd do anything for you. But running a spread! I'm a gambler, ma'am."

"You're loco, John Wyatt!" Glory retorted. "You're still a boy trying to play hero! You can handle cows all right. And I only meant you'd take over Tote's work, if that's what's bothering you!"

Johnny was dumbfounded. He swallowed repeatedly and licked his dry lips. She was close to him now, her face flushed, the dancing gray eyes burning into his own accusingly. He took a faltering step back, gesticulating helplessly.

BUT a swift change came over Glory, and her big eyes became soulful.

"But I can see you wouldn't want to be dragged away from your easy life and fancy women," she murmured. "You go along, John Wyatt. I won't hold it against you." Her sigh made Johnny shudder.

He blurted, "Glory, everything will come out all right! You won't have no trouble — "

She looked up hopefully. "Then you will help me, Johnny?" A grateful, lovely smile lighted her face. "Oh, Johnny, thank you!"

He was vastly bewildered, and his thoughts reeled. He had no rejoinder and he didn't know what to say or do.

A slender hand was on his arm now, and she steered him to the door. Her voice was gentle, intimate.

"In the morning you'll meet Betty Lou. You'll love her, Johnny. And I'll have a hot breakfast to start you off right. You need a little more tallow on those ribs of yours. And — oh, yes. Don't forget to bring some range clothes out with you, Johnny. You can't work in those fancy duds. And" — her voice lowered to a solemn tone — "I think it would be proper and gallant if you were seen attending Tote's burial with me."

He found himself outside the screen door, staring back at her in astonishment.

"Don't be a coward, Johnny, and slink off to another territory. Betty Lou and I are depending on you. Good night, Johnny."

The door closed and he was abruptly in darkness. He didn't know how long he stood there, perfectly still. His mind was a whirlwind. His chest heaved like the sides of an old brindle steer on the prod. Glory's clean woman scent was in his nostrils, her throaty voice ringing echoes in his ears.

She seemed to be everywhere, swiftly, suddenly, her charms a tight loop around his neck. His heart started to rap a tattoo and his knees shook as he thought of the girl who had once seemed so remotely inaccessible — and now she had *him* corraled!

He'd come West looking for a share of glory. He figured his search was done. All the glory a man could handle was in the house there. ●●●

Colorado Riverman

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

Jim swung a hard right at Dorgan

JIM BOWEN turned the wheel of the *Yuma Belle* to avoid a huge snag that jutted up above the muddy waters of the Colorado. He glanced at Captain Sam Postel.

Jim Bowen finds that not all the treacherous currents lay in the swirling red waters of this mighty river!

"Should make Ehrenberg in an hour," he said. Sam nodded as he chewed on his dead cigar. He spat out of the pilot house window. Jim eased the side-wheeler around a bend. "What's bothering you, Sam?"

Sam grunted. "I don't like carrying this silver, Jim."

"We've done it before. There's good money in it and it doesn't take up much cargo space."

"It ain't that. Let me take the wheel. Look out the back window."

Jim turned the wheel over to the skipper and looked out of the window. The Colorado wound behind them, muddy and flecked with yellowish foam from the wake of the steamer. Barren desert flanked the river. A thread of dust rose from the east bank.

"You see that dust, Jim?"

"Yes."

Sam glanced back. "That dust has been close behind us ever since we loaded the silver bullion at Bald Point."

"Indians?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't think so. I felt damned uneasy when we tied up for the night yesterday. Nothing in particular. Just uneasy. You know how it is. This morning I was on the after deck with my glass. I saw that dust again. I put the glass on it. Those are five white men following us, Jim."

Jim looked skeptical. "You've been drinking too much lately, Sam."

"Me? I can still hold my likker. You know who two of those men are?"

"How the hell can I tell from here?"

Sam spun the wheel. He talked back over his shoulder. "Chet Webb and Doak Fisher."

Jim turned quickly. "Doak is still in the Yuma pen, Sam."

"Shows how much you know! He got out last month. He's back with his old partner again."

"I don't know what in hell's name you're worried about. What can they do?"

Sam grunted. "We stop in Ehrenberg to unload that army stuff from Fort Mohave. Take us two-three hours to do that. Then we load wood for the fires. Take another hour. By that time those horsemen will be in Ehrenberg. We'll still have two hours of daylight afore we tie up for the night. Meanwhile them outlaws can ride up to where we're moored and take over."

"You're getting old, Sam. We've got guns. We can shoot as well as they can."

Sam nodded. "Yeh. But those hombres are tough—and mean. They're after this silver, Jim. I'll bet the *Belle* against a plug hat."

"We can moor across the river."

"You think they didn't think of that? Doak is no fool, Jim. We've got a fortune aboard. If I know that coyote he's figured all the angles. We're in for trouble, Jim. You mark my words!"

EHRENBERG squatted on the sands beside the river. One crooked street paralleled the river with a few cross streets straggling back into the desert. There was no sign of greenery, nothing but sand, which seemed to lift and waver in the heat. The Mexicans and Indians unloading the *Yuma Belle* were in no hurry. Sam Postel lashed at them with his tongue but it was no use.

Jim went ashore to contact the army officer for a receipt on the army stores from Fort Mohave. Moored farther up the bank was the stern-wheeler *Fortuna*, one of the fastest steamers on the Colorado. She was smaller than the *Yuma Belle*. There was no one on her decks. Jim plodded through the loose sand of the main street and got his receipt and then stopped at the one saloon Ehrenberg boasted.

"Howdy, Jim," said the barkeep as he slid a bottle across the counter. "You staying here tonight?"

"No, Charlie. Sam wants to make more miles before dark. We wood up here and tie somewhere down the river."

"Sam in a hurry?"

"Yeh." Jim poured a drink and wiped the sweat from his face. "What's the *Fortuna* doing here?"

The barkeep grinned. "Skipper Jen-

sen came in yesterday. Went inland to try and land a contract to bring in supplies for the Verde Mines."

"He's a hustler."

The barkeep nodded. "Yeh. Which is more than you can say for Buck Dorgan, his mate. Buck got pretty drunk in here last night. Shot off his big mouth. Says he and Jensen ain't gettin' along. Wants to pull out on his half share of the *Fortuna* but Jensen ain't got the cash to buy him out."

"I never could figure out how Jensen went in with Buck. He's got a bad reputation on the river. No one else would go in with him."

The barkeep looked up at the door. "Visitors," he said. "I'll be with you later, Jim."

Five men stood just inside the door, blinking in the change from the brilliant sunlight to the semi-darkness of the saloon. They batted some of the dust from their clothing with their hats and walked over to the tables, their spurs jingling musically.

Jim glanced in the mirror. The tallest man was Doak Fisher. Jim knew him well from sight. Doak had been brought down from Fort Mohave two years ago on the *Belle,* manacled and with a three-man guard over him. He had been put into the territorial prison at Yuma. Stage robbing had been the charge, although Doak's history showed blacker spots than robbery. Chet Webb was a squat man with a cast in his left eye. Chet had worked on the river for some years as a pilot until he had set the *Cibola* on a sand bar near Pichacho while drunk.

The other men were typical hardcases. They all sat down at a table near the rear of the saloon and talked in low voices.

Jim poured himself another drink. Chet Webb got up from the table and came over to him.

"Howdy, Jim," he said with a grin. "You takin' passengers for Yuma?"

Jim tried to keep the dislike from his voice. "Not this trip, Chet."

"Why not? Me and the boys are tired of ridin'. We figured we'd take it easy on the *Belle.* You got plenty of room."

"Sam says no passengers."

"Why?"

Jim downed his drink. The short-barreled Colt he had thrust into his waistband before coming ashore was covered by his light linen jacket. He set down his glass and turned so that he could draw in a hurry if he had to.

"Look, Webb," he said easily. "Sam is the skipper. If he doesn't want to take passengers that's the word."

Chet glanced over at his four companions who were watching the scene.

"This hombre gets me," he said with an insolent leer. "Owns half the *Belle* and lets that old bastard Sam Postel give the orders."

Jim gripped Chet by the front of the shirt and swung him so that he was between himself and the others.

"Listen, Webb, I don't like you or your big mouth," he said. "Least of all I don't like you calling Sam Postel a bastard. Now take it back!"

The other men stood up. Chet dropped his hand to his Colt but Jim drew and pushed the muzzle of his pistol into Chet's ribs. "Don't you draw, Webb. Or I'll blow a nice round hole in you."

"Watch it, boys," said Chet over his shoulder. "He's got a stingy gun."

The barkeep suddenly brought up a sawed-off double-barrel, leveled it in the direction of the table, and cocked both barrels.

"Now, boys, I keep a nice place here. This baby is ten-gauge, loaded with Blue Whistlers. I split the wads too. This argument is between Jim and Chet. Set easy. The next drink is on the house."

THE four men sat down again, placed their hands on top of the table.

"If you didn't have that gun in me, Bowen, I'd lambast you good," Chet gritted through tight lips.

Jim spoke over his shoulder. "Charlie, this hombre wants a fight."

Charlie grinned. "Oh, I ain't got any objection to a nice fist fight. I just don't like shootin'. Ruins the fixtures. Be-

sides, Sam is a friend of mine and he ain't no bastard that I know of. You'd better straighten Chet out."

Jim let go Chet's shirt front and with his free hand jerked the man's Colt from its holster. He placed it on the bar and then shoved Chet back, swinging his right hand to place his gun beside Chet's. Chet came in at a rush. Jim braced a foot against the bar and threw a right. Chet caught it on the jaw. He spun sideways and caught a stinging left behind the ear. He went down on one knee and bounced up.

"I'll show you!" he shouted.

Jim's right smacked over his heart and his left sank into Chet's midriff. Chet grunted. Jim stepped away from the bar and brought one up from the floor. Chet met it midway. He went back against a chair, smashing it flat and hit his head against the wall. He groped for a moment with his hands and then lay still.

Jim picked up his Colt and slipped it beneath his waistband. He tipped his hat to the four men in the corner.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said. "What do I owe you for the chair, Charlie?"

"On the house, Jim. It's a pleasure."

Jim walked easily to the door. "I'll send the marshal in, Charlie, if you want me to."

Doak Fisher looked at Jim. "Some day they'll find your corpse floating in the Colorado, Bowen."

"Not as long as I don't turn my back on you, Fisher."

Jim stepped out into the sunlight and sauntered down to the landing. Wyatt Fisk, the town marshal, was talking to Sam.

"Charlie, up at the saloon, might need you, Wyatt," said Jim.

"Me? Why?"

"A few hardcases in there might cause trouble. Charlie has them under control right now."

Fisk set off at a run. Sam looked at Jim curiously.

"I guess I don't have to ask if you were in it. You've got that damned self-important grin on your face."

Jim waved a hand. "Your friend, Chet Webb, got a little lippy. He and his amigos wanted to get passage to Yuma. He got out of hand when I refused him."

Sam paled. "You mean you bucked against that lot?"

Jim nodded. "And we'd better shove off, Sam. Those boys are up to no good." . . .

The *Yuma Belle* cleared the landing with Jim at the wheel. He pulled on the whistle cord, sending the melancholy blast echoing against the bluffs. As he did so he saw Buck Dorgan walking toward the saloon. Sam came into the pilot house.

"Well, we gave them the slip, Jim."

Jim shook his head. "Jensen, of the *Fortuna,* is out of town. Buck Dorgan just went into the saloon. That add up to you?"

Sam shifted his chew. "Dorgan and Jensen ain't gettin' along if that's what you mean."

"The *Fortuna* edges us in speed," said Jim thoughtfully as he skirted a ripple denoting a sand bar.

"Yeh," said Sam softly. "Yeh."

Long shadows were across the river when Jim turned the wheel over to Sam and went below. Old Bill Jessup, the engineer, wiped his hands on a piece of waste and looked at Jim.

"Sam plannin' to tie up soon?" he asked.

"Figured he'd get a few miles more on before dark, Bill. Why?"

"A little condenser trouble, Jim. Won't take long to fix it once we tie up."

Jim whistled. "Of all the times to have trouble!"

"What's botherin' you and Sam?"

Jim told him of the five men at Ehrenberg. Bill rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Doak Fisher and Chet Webb, eh? Rough customers, Jim."

"I'll tell Sam about the condenser. He won't like it."

AFTER he had reported to Sam, Jim went into the salon behind the pilot house and unlocked the gun rack. There were six Starr carbines and six Remington singleshot breech-loading pistols, which Sam had picked up at a sale of

army materiel. Jim placed a Starr in the pilot house. Sam had his Colt six-shooter.

Jim called the crew together—Si Ortby, the cook, Black George and Slim Eddie, the deckhands, and Bill's assistant, Cope Warner.

"You boys have been with Sam and me for quite a spell now," he said. "I'm going to tell you what has come up. If you don't want to stick with us you can leave the *Belle* at the night tieup. Doak Fisher, Chet Webb and three other hardcases are after the bullion. At least Sam and I think so. I had a brawl with Chet in Ehrenberg because I refused him passage to Yuma. If they follow us we mean to fight."

Cope Warner spat. "Hell, we can cross the river, Jim, and stop 'em from crossing if we like."

"If they ride, Cope. Maybe Buck Dorgan will bring them down river on the *Fortuna*."

Black George whistled. "Ah'm bettin' he will, Mistah Jim. I heard talk at the landing that the *Fortuna* was gettin' ready to shove off. I figured it was kinda funny because Captain Jensen is inland."

"Well, what do you men say?" asked Jim.

"I ain't leavin' the *Belle*," said Black George.

"Bill needs me to help him with that condenser," said Cope.

Si Ortby grinned. "I got three pies in the oven," he said. "I can't leave now."

Slim Eddie took a Starr from Jim's hand. "I'll get up on the hurricane and keep a lookout," he said. "I'm pretty handy with one of these."

"We'll have to keep watch tonight," said Jim. "Two men at a time."

The *Yuma Belle* nosed into the west bank at twilight. Bill Jessup and Cope Warner set to work at once. Slim Eddie and Black George piled boxes and bales on the after end of the hurricane deck. Jim went up to the pilot house. Sam was leaning on the sill of one of the after windows, looking up the river.

"How long before Bill gets that condenser fixed, Jim?" he asked.

"Three hours at least."

"I don't like this."

Jim loaded his Starr and nodded. "There's one way out."

"What?"

"Leave before dawn."

Sam turned. "Are you crazy?"

"Do you have any other suggestions?"

"No," Sam admitted. "But I hate to risk the *Belle*."

"So do I. What do you say?"

"I don't trust my eyes after dark, Jim."

"Then I'll handle her."

Sam turned to the window and stood there a long time. Then he spoke over his shoulder.

"All right, Jim. There ain't a better pilot on the river, much as I hate to admit it. Take her down when you're ready."

Bill finished the condenser before midnight. It was two hours before dawn when Jim, asleep on the pilot house bench, was awakened by Sam.

"You ready, Jim?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

He sipped the hot coffee Sam had brought up from the galley. Below him in the engine room he heard the clang of a shovel. He whistled into the voice tube. Black George and Slim Eddie looked up from the mooring lines.

"Cast off!" ordered Jim.

The shore was a dim line and the form of the after end of the steamer was hardly visible as the two deckhands brought the lines on board. Jim worked the engine room telegraph for slow astern and then turned the wheel as the current caught the side-wheeler.

Slow ahead the *Yuma Belle* forged. Jim stared into the half light. The river was a dim path between the sandy shores. The *Belle* shuddered as the engine began to throb. Sparks drifted up from the big stack and a pall of smoke swept over the river. The *Yuma Belle* was under way.

Black George posted himself at the very prow of the boat, straining his eyes against the dimness. Sam stood to one side of the big wheel, his gnarled hands gripping

the sill of the big forward window. Shadows fled by in the darkness. Jim steered for the center of the river. The *Yuma Belle* drew twenty-four inches of water when carrying sixty tons of freight and she had about half of that on board. Her seventy horsepower engine could drive her at a good clip but the *Fortuna* had the edge of a few knots and was handier, being twenty feet shorter than the *Belle's* one hundred and four feet.

"Snag to port!" bellowed George.

Jim spun the big wheel and the *Belle* heeled under the thrust of her paddles.

"Clear!" shouted George.

SAM raised his hand and then lowered it as Jim bypassed a line of deep ripples denoting a sand bar. Then came a sharp curve, close inshore where the water was deep, and the men ducked as overhanging brush scraped the upper works of the steamer.

"Nothing like the Hudson, eh, Jim?" asked Sam.

Jim shook his head. He had learned steamboating on the Hudson as a boy. The Colorado was vastly different.

"Sometimes I'm sorry I ever left the Hudson," he said.

"The Mississippi was bad enough," Sam grunted. "But I thought I was so damned smart. I wish I had the old *General Jackson.* I'd show the *Fortuna* a thing or two about speed."

"I'd like to see you wrap her around some of these bends, Sam."

It was almost daylight, the eastern sky tinted with the false dawn, when the *Yuma Belle* struck. Her prow ran up on a sand bar below Palo Verde Bluff. Jim had the engine reversed instantly. The big paddles thrashed, sending up a shower of spume. The hull shuddered under the thrust. Jim ran her forward again and then reversed her. She heeled a little and then righted herself. Smoke billowed up, shot with sparks. The engine throbbed as Jim called for reverse again. At last the *Yuma Belle* shook herself free like a wet dog. Jim swung past the sand bar and grinned at Sam.

"Made it," he said.

Sam snorted. "Look behind you," he said quietly.

Jim glanced back. A half mile up the river a plume of smoke rose against the dawn. Below it was the white upper works of a steamer. The *Fortuna.* Jim rang for more speed and the *Belle* creaked and groaned as the high pressure engine responded.

"Do you think they're on board, Sam?"

"No doubt about it. Jensen wouldn't take the *Fortuna* down the river unless it was broad daylight. They've been steaming in the dark too. Buck Dorgan must be in on the deal.

Jim eyed the channel, now revealed in the dawn light. A cottonwood log turned over slowly in the swift current. He swung the *Belle* to starboard and the log bumped along below the deck overhang. He glanced back. The *Fortuna* was a little closer. Something white puffed out from her upper deck.

"They're shooting," he said. "No doubt about it now."

Sam picked up his carbine.

"Let it go, Sam," Jim told him. "You couldn't hit them with that." He jerked his head as something rapped into the wood of the pilot house. He had seen long Sharps rifles booted beside the saddles of the five men in Ehrenberg. Those accurate weapons could plant a fifty caliber slug easily in the *Yuma Belle* from half a mile.

An hour later the *Fortuna* had closed the gap to a quarter of a mile, plowing through the pall of smoke laid down by the *Yuma Belle.* Holes showed in the tall stack of the *Belle* and Sam had the two deckhands stack boxes behind Jim as he stood at the wheel. The deck of the *Belle* throbbed steadily with the pound of the engine. The constant clang of shovels and the banging of the fire door came up from below. Black George and Cope Warner were firing for Bill. Slim Eddie lay on the hurricane deck with his carbine poked between two boxes, firing now and then at the *Fortuna,* but the range was still too great for the Starr.

Sam fired his carbine and turned to reload. "They're gaining, Jim!"

A slug smacked into the funnel as he spoke. Eddie's Starr cracked flatly. Jim swung in beneath a bluff to reach the deeper water.

"We're full out," he said. The *Belle* labored as she swung out into the channel again, shooting past the bluffs. The sun had begun to beat down on the river, glinting from the waves. Jim squinted.

"We'll have to keep on. What else can we do? We can't stop. We might fight it out with them but we'd lose men."

"So?"

Jim turned his head without taking his eyes from the river. "We can ram the bastards," he said. "A mile down is that wide spot. I'll let the *Fortuna* creep up and then try for her."

"If you miss we'll run aground sure."

"We'll have to take that chance. If they take us they won't leave any of us to tell the tale. They're pirates." He laughed grimly. "Pirates on the Colorado. That's a new twist."

"I don't get the joke," said Sam. He fired again. "Made the splinters fly anyway, Jim."

The river started to widen. Jim reduced speed, and the *Fortuna* began to gain on them. Slugs rained about the *Yuma Belle* as she struggled with the current. The shores were farther away now, the channel much wider.

"She's three hundred yards behind," Sam said tensely.

"Keep calling the distance, Sam."

"Two hundred and fifty."

Jim gripped the wheel hard.

"Two hundred."

Jim eased the steamer to starboard, cutting to the side of the channel.

"One hundred and fifty." A slug rapped into box, punctuating Sam's words. "One hundred!"

JIM called for full speed and as the *Yuma Belle* surged forward he put the wheel hard over. Dishes rattled in

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the galley. Firewood spilled over the side as the craft heeled into the sharp turn. The brown water of the river lapped over the starboard overhang at the bows. The *Belle* shuddered as she came out of the turn. The *Fortuna* was close behind.

Jim jerked his head as a slug whimpered past his ear. The *Fortuna* grew in size, revealing the men on her decks. For a moment they stood with open mouths and then fled aft. Jim could see Buck Dorgan spinning the wheel of the smaller boat. The gap closed. Suddenly, with a grinding, wrenching crash the prow of the *Yuma Belle* lanced into the port side of the *Fortuna,* just abaft the forward deck.

Jim went over sideways, bruising his shoulder on the wheel spokes. Sam lurched against him, pitching him out of the door. He tumbled off the deck, clawed for a hold, dropped to the lower deck and went over the side. Smoke billowed about him as he hit the water between the two vessels. He came up gasping. Boxes and crates tumbled about him as the two boats swung slowly in the swift current. He gripped a brace beneath the *Fortuna's* overhang and pulled himself on board.

"Sheer off!" he shouted at Sam.

Men were shouting all over the *Fortuna.* Jim staggered as the stern-wheeler hit a snag, shuddering from stem to stern. A man rounded the forward end of the cabin. It was Chet Webb. He clawed down for his Colt as he saw Jim. Jim snatched up a billet of firewood and hurled it. It struck Webb between the eyes. He staggered sideways and then pitched over the rail, down between the grinding hulls. A scream rose and then he was gone. Jim picked up a billet. One of the men who had been in the saloon swung at him. The billet caught him across the throat and he tumbled back into the engine room.

The paddle wheels of the *Yuma Belle* thrashed as she backed off, her bow splintered and torn. The gap widened. The *Fortuna* began to list. The *Fortuna's*

wheel thrashed in reverse and then forward as the bell rang in the engine room. The brown waters of the river lapped hungrily into the rent in her side. Jim ran forward, leaping the gap in the hull. The *Fortuna* turned toward the *Belle*.

"I'll sink that damned scow before we go under!" roared Buck Dorgan.

Jim gripped the edge of the upper deck and swung himself up. He rolled onto the deck in time to see Doak Fisher draw. Jim dived forward, butting the outlaw head on. Doak's gun went off as they fell. The slug cut through Jim's left sleeve. He jumped to his feet and hit Doak. Doak went back, fell over a box and hit the lower deck with a thud.

The *Fortuna* turned sluggishly toward the *Belle*. Jim gripped the edges of the pilot house door and propelled himself in. Buck Dorgan was at the wheel. Jim pulled him away, swung a hard right. Dorgan fell back against the wall of the pilot house. Jim spun the wheel. The *Fortuna* eased off as the *Belle* forged ahead. Dorgan kicked out at Jim. Jim darted aside and hit the riverman with a jolting left.

"The boiler is going to let go!" someone roared from the lower deck.

Men jumped over the side. Jim ran to the door. Dorgan tackled him. Jim slammed down a right and kicked himself free. He poised for a moment on the

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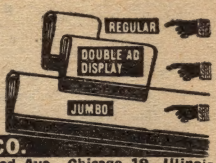

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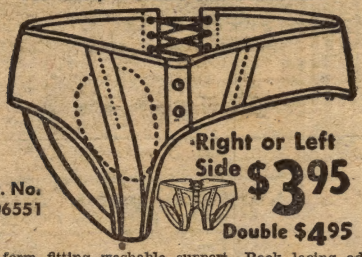

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deck and then dived cleanly, missing the lower deck by inches.

As the waters closed about him he heard a tremendous roar. He bobbed up. Bits of wood and metal splashed all about him. A shattered board gashed his scalp. The *Fortuna* was gone, the surging waters covered with flotsam. A head bobbed up near Jim and a man called out weakly. Jim swam to him. It was Dorgan. He held the mate up as the *Yuma Belle,* low in the water, closed in toward him. Black George dropped on the deck and pulled Buck up. Jim hauled himself up on the deck and sprawled flat.

"You all right, Jim?" called Sam from the pilot house. "I'll have to beach the *Belle*! We're taking water!"

The *Yuma Belle* turned slowly in toward the west shore. Jim jerked a thumb at Dorgan.

"Watch him, George. Were there any others?"

Black George's eyes were wide. "No, suh. Not a one. I never seen anythin' like *that* before."

The current was sweeping the debris of the *Fortuna* down river as Jim wearily climbed up to the pilot house. Sam eased the battered prow of the *Belle* up on a narrow beach. He rang to stop the engines. He turned to Jim.

"Well, I figure you'll be heading back for the peaceful Hudson after this, Jim."

Jim grinned wearily and spat over the side into the racing waters of the Colorado. "No. The Colorado is a bitch. No doubt about that. But there's something fascinating about the old girl. I'm staying on, Sam. We've got a lot of steamboating to do."

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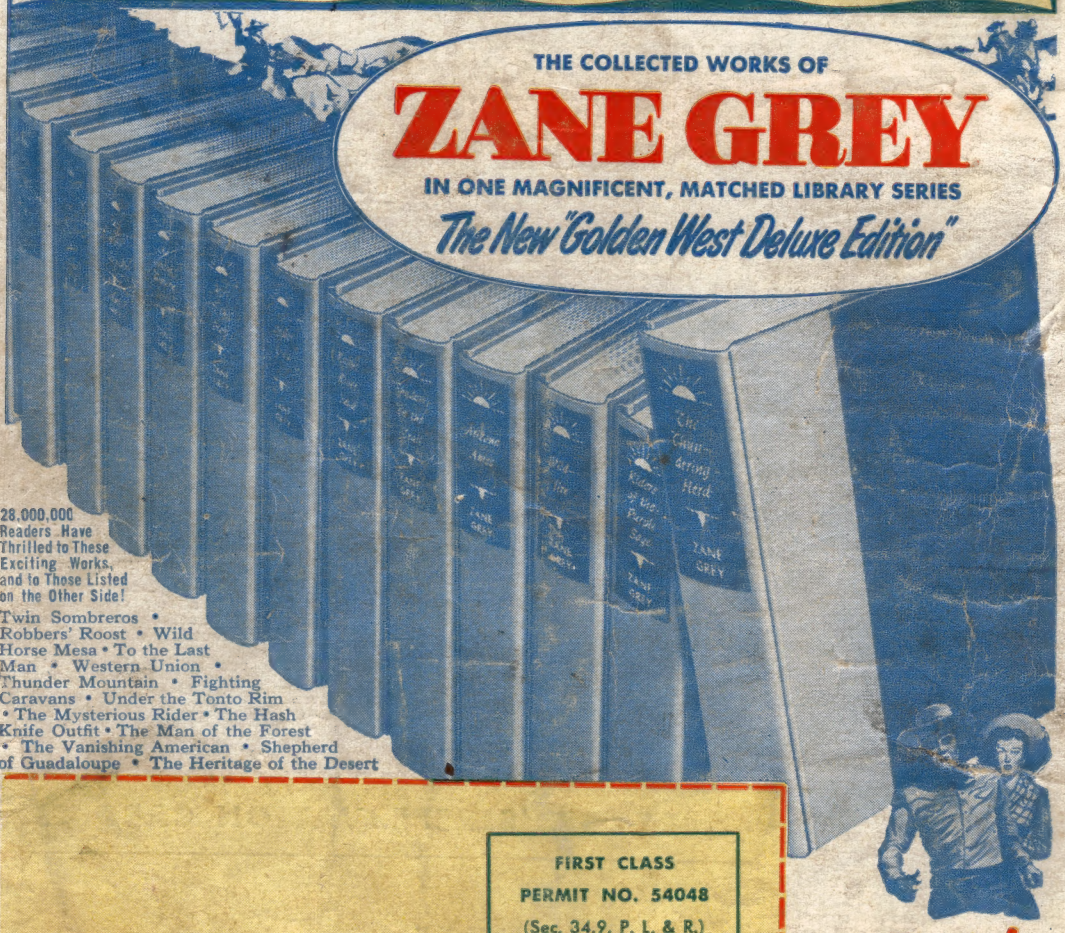

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